

**POETICS OF THE SACRED:  
DIVINATIONS OF IDENTITY IN THE FRENCH AVANT-GARDE**

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IN THE FRENCH AVANT-GARDE**

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In response to the social fragmentation wrought in the wake of WWI, many French avant-garde writers integrated the findings of sociological studies of religion into their art. The authors considered here, including Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris, and Collette Peignot, believed that literature could effect a renewed religious sense of human communion able to redress the social and political fragmentation of interwar France. Integral to this endeavor was their conception of self-sacrifice, which they sought both to represent and practice in literary form. As I demonstrate, their vision of self-sacrifice describes a paradox whereby the expropriation of personal identity is reappropriated in the form of a negative otherness. While some scholars claim that such self-sacrifice unwittingly endorses the fascist collectivism of the 1930s, others defend it as an ethical communitarianism resistant to any form of state politics or group identity. My argument subverts this debate by illustrating how their religiosity is based on a theory of endless self-sacrifice, one that continually wavers between personal identity and an unknown, divine alterity. This self-sacrificial mechanism creates new hybrid identities, neither entirely shared nor singular, neither entirely collectivist nor communitarian. As a result, new raced, gendered, sexed, and political identities emerge in literary representations of self-sacrifice that 1) overturn normative political and ethical categories and 2) anticipate contemporary theories of identity formation. As such, this dissertation forcefully urges a reevaluation of established norms in the field concerning the status of religion, community, and personal identity in the French literary avant-garde.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sean Patrick Connolly was raised in many different suburbs on Long Island, home of the first planned community and non-stop flight to Paris. After graduating with honors from Center Moriches High School in 1994, he worked his way through college doing everything from bartending to banking. Against the prudent admonitions of his far wiser counselors, he dedicated himself to the study of letters and languages and became the only student to graduate Phi Beta Kappa with a double-degree in philosophy and literature from Stony Brook University's Honors College in 1999. Unsure of the focus his graduate study was to take, he applied to different programs in literature and thought, and was pleasantly surprised to be accepted to Cornell University's Doctoral Program in Comparative Literature, for which this dissertation represents the conclusion. Having decided to dedicate himself to the study of 20th century French literature and philosophy early in his program, and with the generous support of an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Dissertation Fellowship and Mario Einaudi Research Grant, he moved to France both to improve his linguistic abilities and advance his doctoral research. To this end, he enrolled as a student (*troisième cycle*) at the University of Paris VIII Nanterre, where he completed a *Diplôme d'études approfondies* in philosophy under the guidance of Alain Brossat in 2004. After a year as a Lecturer at the Ecole Normale Supérieure des Lettres et Sciences Humaines in Lyon, he returned to the New York in 2005 to continue teaching and complete the work found herein. He is now a Visiting Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature at his *alma mater*, where he enjoys teaching classes in French, comparative literature, and cultural studies.



*For my family,  
who showed me unconditional love, faith, and support  
throughout the course of this thesis.*

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## INTRODUCTION

*Tel apparaît le sacré[:] Il émane du monde obscur du sexe et de la mort, mais il est le principe essentiel de la vie et la source de toute efficacité...toujours égale à elle-même, dangereuse et indispensable à la fois.*  
-Roger Caillois, *L'homme et le sacré*<sup>1</sup>

In George Bataille's famous short story *Madame Edwarda*, the nameless narrator describes his sexual encounter with the prostitute Edwarda as a moment of divine communion. Holding her in his arms, he says:

Je serrai Edwarda dans mes bras, elle me sourit : aussitôt, transi, je ressentis en moi un nouveau choc, une sorte de silence tomba sur moi de haut et me glaça. J'étais élevé dans un vol d'anges qui n'avaient ni corps ni têtes, faits de glissements d'ailes, mais c'était simple: je devins malheureux et me senti abandonné comme on l'est en présence de DIEU. C'était pire et plus fou que l'ivresse. Et d'abord je sentis une tristesse à l'idée de cette grandeur, qui tombait sur moi, me dérobait les plaisirs que je comptais goûter avec Edwarda.<sup>2</sup>

The narrator's description is noticeably full of ambiguity. When he is closest to Edwarda (*dans mes bras*), he is nevertheless ruefully abandoned (*abandonné*). The touch of Edwarda is felt like a paralytic shock (*transi, me glaça*), yet one that exultantly transports him towards the heavens of disembodied angels (*élevé dans un vol d'anges*), toward a state more maddening than delirium (*plus fou que l'ivresse*). At this intense moment of intoxicating grandeur (*grandeur*), he nevertheless ironically feels a morbid malcontent (*malheureux*), one that silences him (*silence tomba sur moi*) and steals the away the very pleasures (*plaisirs*) of Edwarda's embrace. The contradictory elements of the narrator's description offer less a clear diegesis than a

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Caillois, *L'homme et le sacré*, 3 ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), 203.

<sup>2</sup> Georges Bataille, *Madame Edwarda. Le mort. Histoire de l'oeil* (Paris: J.J. Pauvert, 1973), 33.

gestural portrait of an encounter beyond representation. The language makes apparent the vexing challenge of evoking the silence that fell over him. His description is fragmented, paratactic. He is simultaneously embraced and alone, paralyzed and ascendant, abandoned and in the presence of God. Much like the frequent ellipses throughout the story, these moments of paradox and incoherence attempt to vocalize what is mute, to communicate what is ultimately incommunicable. This momentary encounter, caught between paralysis and transcendence, communion and abandonment, exultation and torpor, speech and silence marks a moment of vacillation and ambivalence, a paradoxical state in which the narrator is quite simply “at a loss,” having reached the limits of language and indeed the limits of his very being. He has entered a new realm beyond these limits, one of combined ascendancy and annihilation that Bataille elsewhere would call the *sacred*.

In *L'érotisme* (1957), Bataille offers one of his most explicit formulations of this concept. “La chose sacrée”, he writes, “n’a pas seulement le pouvoir de nous donner...un sentiment d’effroi et de tremblement. Ce sentiment se change à la limite en dévotion; il se change en adoration...[il] désigne en même temps les deux contraires.”<sup>3</sup> The protagonist of Bataille’s story exhibits precisely this ambivalence toward Edwarda, herself a figure for God, whom he finds both attractive and repulsive. The danger, audacity, and darkness she embodies both compel his desires and inspire his fear: she is “ravishing” (*ravissante*), “fascinating” (*Edwarda me fascinait*), and yet “obscene” (*obscene*), “agonizing” (*agoissante*). Edwarda and God, like “la chose sacrée,” echo the *coincidentia oppositorum* of Scholastic theology in which all

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<sup>3</sup> ———, *L'érotisme* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1957), 76.

opposites, logical and axiological, coincide in the unity of the Divine.<sup>4</sup> If “Dieu est une femme publique,” as Bataille asserts in *Edwarda*, it is precisely because of the ambiguous commingling of opposing values and categories implied by the sacred.

This “ambivalence of the sacred”—as it came to be known—finds its earliest formulation in William Robertson Smith’s influential *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1889). In the section entitled “Holiness, Uncleanliness, and Taboo,” Smith explains that certain examples of contagion in Semitic religion “may suffice to show that it is impossible to separate the Semitic doctrine of holiness and uncleanness from the system of taboo.”<sup>5</sup> Taboos such as menstruation, ritual clothing, contact with the dead, and sexual intercourse have a precarious value in Semitic religion since they betoken a divine power that is at once dangerous and beneficial. Taboo interdictions concerning holiness parallel those concerning impurity:

Alongside of taboos that exactly correspond to rules of holiness protecting the inviolability of idols and sanctuaries, priests and chiefs, and all...things pertaining to God... we find another kind of taboo which in the Semitic field has its parallel rules of uncleanliness. Women after childbirth, men who have touched a dead body and so forth are temporarily taboo and are separated from human society as unclean persons are in the Semitic religion...In most savage societies,

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, when the scholastic philosopher Nicolas de Cusa invented this theological concept in his *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae*, he was specifically referencing that quality of God in which all worldly oppositions and contradictions—especially good and evil—are reconciled in coincident unity. See Iñigo Kristien Marcel Bocken, *Conflict and Reconciliation : Perspectives on Nicolas of Cusa*, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History, v. 126 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2004). This concept also serves as the introduction to Michel Leiris’ *Miroir de la tauromachie*, wherein it is argued that the *coincidentia oppositorum* offers a means of understanding the reconciliation of all things in the divine. Just as infinity of lines may pass through a point, so is all multiplicity reconciled in the divine as the common locus. “Comme le Dieu de Nicolas de Cuse,” he says, “l’absolu dans la seule mesure où il embrasse, en même temps qu’il s’y déchire, l’ensemble de toutes les lignes et de toutes leur déviations” (Michel Leiris, *Miroir de la tauromachie* [Paris: Fata Morgana, 1981], 25).

<sup>5</sup> W. Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites : The Fundamental Institutions*, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 433.



no sharp line seems to be drawn between the two kinds of taboo just indicated...the notions of holiness and uncleanness often touch.<sup>6</sup>

As an example, Smith later explains that the holy flesh of a sacrificial sin-offering “conveys a taboo to everyone who touches it, and if a drop of the blood falls on a garment, [it] must be washed, i.e., the sanctity must be washed out in a holy place, while the earthen pot in which the sacrifice is sodden must be broken, as in the case where dead vermin falls in a vessel and renders it unclean.”<sup>7</sup> The uncleanness of the sin-offering, in other words, must be removed or distanced from ordinary life in the same manner as a holy place or sacred object.<sup>8</sup> In this “no man’s land,” estranged from the common, profane space of everyday life, the clean therefore mingles with the unclean and the unholy with the holy. Able to both bless and curse, it thus becomes endowed with a precarious and ambivalent power. Indeed, its power resides precisely *in* this ambivalence, in its homeopathic potential to become both; without it, the pure could not become sullied, nor would it be possible to purify what has become contagious. The actual effects of this ambivalence are significant, since the very same object or space can heal or hurt, bless or curse. In either case, however, the sacred possesses no inherent positive attribute of its own. As Bataille’s colleague Roger Caillois writes in the introduction to *L’homme et le sacré* (1939), “la seule chose qu’on puisse affirmer valablement est contenue dans la définition même du terme: c’est ce qu’il s’oppose au profane.”<sup>9</sup> Emile Durkheim was perhaps the first to suggest

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 152-3. See also Lev 6:20 and Lev 16:19-20, which serve as examples of Smith’s claim.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Hugette Fugier remarks, for example, that “les forces ou les êtres sacres qui réside en un lieu...demeurent ambiguës: à l’essai, ils risquent de se manifester plutôt pour le mal que pour le bien des arrivants. C’est pourquoi le fait de s’aventurer loin des sites familiers pose au Romain un problème religieux. Rien de tout cela n’est assurément particulier à Rome, ni très originale dans le monde antique —non plus que la solution qui consiste à ‘propitier’ (*piare*) ces forces ou ces êtres inconnus.” See Hugette Fugier, *Recherches sur l’expression du sacré dans la langue latine* (Paris: En dépôt à la Société d’éditions: Les Belles Lettres, 1963), 421.

<sup>9</sup> Caillois, *L’homme et le sacré*, 17.

the negativity inherent to their understanding of the sacred when he called it an “essentially heterogeneous” phenomenon (*essentiellement hétérogène*).<sup>10</sup>

After Smith’s influential study, the sacred’s characteristic coupling of attraction and repulsion, purity and impurity, fear and fascination, veneration and condemnation, originating in the sociology of religion, was widely influential all throughout the 20th century human sciences. Durkheim, his nephew Marcel Mauss, and other members of the French *Ecole sociologique*—who in turn strongly influenced Bataille and his peers—drew heavily on Smith’s observations and further formalized the tenet of sacred ambivalence. In “L’essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice” (1899), Mauss makes reference to Smith when he describes the transformation of the sacrificial victim from social pathogen to cure: “le caractère ambigu des choses sacrées, que R. Smith avait si admirablement mis en lumière, lui permettait d’expliquer facilement comment une telle transformation avait pu se produire.”<sup>11</sup> Later, Mauss’ uncle would echo him in his more comprehensive *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912) where he writes : “Il y a deux sortes de sacrée, l’un faste, l’autre néfaste, et non seulement entre les deux formes opposés il n’y a pas de solution de continuité, mais un même objet peut passer de l’une à l’autre sans changer de nature.”<sup>12</sup> William Ward Fowler in “On the Meaning of the Word *Sacer*” (1911), Sigmund Freud in *Totem und*

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<sup>10</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse : le système totémique en Australie*, 4th ed. (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1998), 53. Bataille would later borrow this meaning of “heterogeneity” from Durkheim and develop it into a broader philosophy of political ontology in his pre-war writings and, still later, into a theory of political economy in *La part maudite* (1949). Counterpoised against this concept is of course “homogeneity,” which Bataille describes to be the order of identity and assured limits, one from which “all violence is excluded”: “en principe, toute violence est exclue du cours d’existence ainsi impliqué” (Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Michel Foucault [Paris: Gallimard, 1970], vol. I, 340). Yet, he elsewhere will ascribe to the formation of homogeneity a constitutive violence he cannot fully exclude from its other, the “heterogeneous”: “Au départ, une opposition calme à la violence n’aurait pas suffi...si l’opposition n’avait elle-même en quelque manière participé de la violence” (Bataille, *L’Erotisme*, 90). This apparent contradiction is explored in greater depth in the first chapter.

<sup>11</sup> Marcel Mauss and Viktor Karady, *Oeuvres*, vol. I: *Les fonctions sociales du sacré* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1968), 195.

<sup>12</sup> Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse : le système totémique en Australie*, 588.

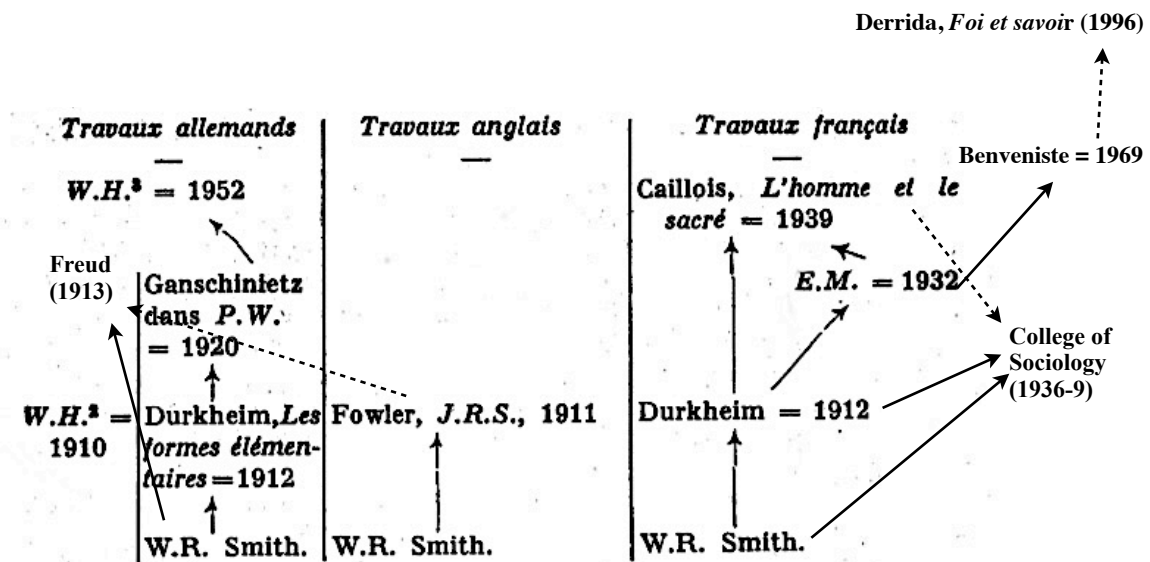
*Tabou* (1913), Rudolf Otto in *Das Heilige* (1917), and Roger Caillois in *L'homme et le sacré* (1939) would offer different interpretations of this same tenet, broadening significantly its conceptual and disciplinary scope beyond ethnology and sociology into the fields of psychoanalysis, theology, and philosophy. It is appropriate therefore that, as Hugette Fugier shows in his voluminous study *Recherches sur l'expression du sacré dans la langue latine* (1963), the definition of the Latin *sacer* and its historical descendants in the various European languages had officially adopted this dual-definition sometime between 1910 and 1932, the publication dates of two authoritative Latin dictionaries (**Fig. 0.1**).<sup>13</sup>

The ambivalence of the sacred precipitated the association of a whole host of other terms, including the Greek *ayos*, the Hebrew *kadesh*, the Melanesian *mana*, the Malaysian *pamali*, the ancient Japanese *kami*, the Dakotan *wakan*, and the Iroquois *orenda*.<sup>14</sup> The ambivalence and dualism characterizing taboo *sacer* was coincidental to each of these terms, as was their opposition, so it was argued, to *profanum*, i.e., what is

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<sup>13</sup> Fugier, *Recherches sur l'expression du sacré dans la langue latine*, 238. The two dictionaries are *A. Walde's Latieinisches etymologisches Worterbuch* (1910) and Alfred Ernout-Meillet's *Dictionnaire etymologique de la langue latine* (1932). This section of Fugier's study sketches the evolution of this concept from French ethnology to sociology in the early 20th century, attributing its transference to the intellectual cross-fertilization of different disciplines at the Sorbonne. The close ties existing between the *Ecole sociologique* and linguists like Ernout-Meillet were decisive for the broader acceptance of this doctrine among the human sciences. Fugier cites Caillois explicitly as one of the heritors of this trend. As I later explain, Giorgio Agamben faults these intellectual influences with the acceptance of sacred ambivalence, which as he claims in *Homo Sacer : Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998) obscures the true meaning of the sacred.

<sup>14</sup> See Sigmund Freud and James Strachey, *Totem and Taboo : Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), 18. Also illustrative of this point is the section "Ambiguïté du sacré" in Caillois, *L'homme et le sacré*, 43-77.



**Figure 0.1.** Semantic genealogy of the word “sacred” (*sacré*, *sacer*, *heilig*, etc.) as a sociological term denoting religious ambiguity or ambivalence. “E.M.” refers to Ernout-Meillet’s Latin Dictionary; “W.H.” refers to Walde’s *Worterbuch*. (Based on Fugier’s research in *Recherches sur l’expression du sacré dans la langue latine*).

literally “outside the temple”: the quotidian, accessible, and ordinary. The apparent synonymy of the terms, accompanied by their heterogeneous time periods and geographical locations, permitted the postulation of sacred ambivalence as a universal or transhistorical axiom. In *L’homme et le sacre*, Roger Cailliois exemplifies this trend: “à travers toute l’histoire religieuse” he writes, “la notion du sacre a garde une individualité bien marquée qui lui confère une incontestable unité, quelque diverses qu’apparaissent, de la plus grossière à la plus élaborée, les civilisations où on la constate.”<sup>15</sup>

The linguistic adoption of this tenet would culminate in Emile Benveniste’s celebrated 1969 study in comparative linguistics, *Le Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, where he places the sacred (*le sacré*) among the most fundamental of Indo-European religious institutions. Though there exists, he claims, no known common pre-history or linguistic root for the term and that it presents some “difficultés de méthode,” its equivalents among the various Indo-European languages exhibit many uncanny semantic and conceptual similarities. Distinguishing the sacred among that of its counterpart institutions is a curious lexical dualism; in each of the languages he considers, there seems to be not one, but two distinct terms referring to the same notion.<sup>16</sup> The ancient Avestan adjective *spénta* (“holy,” “sanctified,” L. *sanctus*), is coincident with *yaozdata*, meaning “adapted for religious purposes.” In Greek, *heiros* (“sacred”) is often coupled with *hagios*, meaning again “sanctioned,” “sanctified” in some religious manner. The Latin *sanctus* (“sanctioned”) and *sacer* (“sacred”) are often similarly juxtaposed, though Benveniste is careful to distinguish their meanings; whereas *sacer* refers to that which belongs to the gods and thus is to be banished from the the world of men, *sanctus* refers to that which delimits or

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>16</sup> Emile Benveniste and Jean Lallot, *Le Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1969), 185.

proscribes those things called *sacer*.<sup>17</sup> Though each language ascribes a different meaning and value to these dualisms, all of them commonly reveal a certain equivocation or ambivalence concerning the status of the divine, which itself seems metonymic for a greater, unnamed, and even perhaps unnamable notion that encompasses them both. “Voilà comment se distribuent dans le vocabulaire de chaque langue ces deux qualités,” he writes, “illustrant les deux aspects *d’une même notion*: ce qui est rempli d’une puissance divine; ce qui est interdit au contact des hommes.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the sacred came to encompass such a variety of meanings, histories, and cultures that it seemed ultimately devoid of meaning. Being that which is simply “opposed to the profane,” it becomes a “negative concept” that, due to its vagary, would be subjected to skeptical scientific critique.

Levi-Strauss was among the first to contest the notion in his introduction to Marcel Mauss’ *Sociologie et anthropologie* (1950), where he writes that *mana*, then synonymous with *sacer*, taboo, and so many other terms, has become nothing but an empty term or “floating signifier”:

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<sup>17</sup> Benveniste explains: “La différence entre *sacer* and *sanctus* se voit en plusieurs circonstances. Il n’y a pas seulement la différence entre *sacer*, état naturel, et *sanctus*, résultat d’une opération...Ce qui est *sanctus*, c’est le mur, mais non pas le domaine que le mur enceint, qui est dit *sacer*; est *sanctum* ce qui est défendu par certaines sanctions. Mais le fait d’entrer en contact avec le sacré n’entraîne pas l’état *sanctus*; Il n’y a pas de sanction pour celui qui, touchant le *sacer*, devient lui-même *sacer*; il est banni de la communauté, on ne le châtie pas, ni non plus celui qui le tue. On dirait que le *sanctum*, c’est ce qui se trouve à la périphérie du *sacrum*, qui sert à l’isoler de tout contact” (Ibid., 190).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 207. Emphasis mine.

Les notions du type *mana*, aussi diverses qu'elles puissent être, et en les envisageant dans leur fonction la plus générale...représentent précisément ce *signifiant flottant*, qui est la servitude de toute pensée finie...en effet, le *mana* est tout...à la fois; mais précisément, n'est-ce pas parce qu'il n'est rien de tout cela.<sup>19</sup>

Huette Fugier similarly calls for the adumbration of the concept, questioning its accuracy for Latin and other particular cases. “Mieux vaut donc s’en tenir à l’autre méthode,” he argues, “celle déjà éprouvée et qui s’adapte le plus étroitement aux situations concrètes.”<sup>20</sup> Giorgio Agamben is the most prominent recent critic of sacred ambivalence in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1989), where he argues that this notion, so influential for French intellectuals of the 30s, is a recent historical “mythologeme” that has eclipsed the true history and meaning of the Latin *sacer*; if not the notion of the sacred in general.<sup>21</sup> Agamben, like Fugier, contests the history of which Benveniste’s comparative method is part, and implicitly Benveniste himself, for obscuring through comparison the particularities of various languages, religions, and cultures and thus provoking erroneous generalities, if not a mythic transhistoricism. As Chapter One of this thesis illustrates, however, Agamben’s critique goes much further than Fugier and Levi-Strauss’, dismissing the concept of ambivalence entirely

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<sup>19</sup> Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et anthropologie*, 4th ed. (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1966), XLIX-L. Freud’s definition in *Totem and Taboo* illustrates Levi-Strauss’ position: “The word ‘taboo’ denotes everything, whether a person or a place or a thing or a transitory condition, which is the vehicle or source of this mysterious attribute. It also denotes the prohibitions arising from the same attribute. And, finally, it has a connotation which includes alike ‘sacred’ and ‘above the ordinary,’ as well as ‘dangerous,’ ‘unclean,’ and ‘uncanny’” (Freud and Strachey, *Totem and Taboo : Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, 22).

<sup>20</sup> Fugier, *Recherches sur l’expression du sacré dans la langue latine*, 241. Though Fugier credits Durkheim for expounding upon Smith’s claim for the ambiguity of taboos in Semitic religion, he regrets that this begins a trend that transforms sacred ambivalence a sociological axiom by the time Caillois’ *L’homme et le sacré*. Fugier persuasively argues that it was the intimacy of the faculty at L’école normale supérieure that contributed to the dissemination of the sacred as a intellectually fashionable concept.

<sup>21</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer : Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 75-86. Despite Agamben’s trenchant critique, it is nevertheless possible to detect a certain “ambiguity” in his notion of the “inclusive exclusion” or “exclusive inclusion,” whereby the sacred man, like the sovereign, occupies a juridical space that is both lawful and beyond the law.

and supplanting it with his own concept of the sacred, one quite transhistorical in its own right.

Ironically, it is also for its conceptual vagary--its "heterogeneity"--that it had become a dynamic notion of radical theoretical influence, especially as it was developed and evoked by members of the College of Sociology (1937-9), including Georges Bataille. The College was a diverse group of French avant-garde artists and intellectuals who convened in Paris to use, study, and practice sociology as a means to redress the existing social ills of capitalism, corporatism, and fascism. The sacred's "heterogeneity" empowered the College and its members to theorize new conceptions of aesthetic, political, and ethical existence they considered resistant to the inhuman "homogenizing" tendencies of fascism and capitalism. Bataille in particular would develop the concept of heterogeneity into a kind of radical political ontology in his controversial 1933 essay "*Le structure psychologique du fascisme*," where he writes that heterogeneity, of which the sacred is a "restricted form" (*forme restreinte*), takes the shape of a violent madness and delirium able to break the laws of social homogeneity, such as industrialism, law, and the state.<sup>22</sup>

Through the work of the authors surrounding College of Sociology, it is possible to reevaluate the cultural and historical significance sacred ambivalence without denying the validity of the above scientific concerns. It is through the work of Bataille and the College that the "heterogeneous" tenet of sacred ambivalence--which ultimately concerns the paradoxical effects of *violence* on personal and group identity--became a concept of decisive, perhaps even unrealized importance for

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<sup>22</sup> Bataille writes "la violence, la démesure, le délire, la folie, caractérisent à des degrés divers les éléments hétérogènes: actifs, en tant que personnes ou en tant que foules, ils se produisent en brisant les lois de l'homogénéité sociale" (Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, 347).



interwar France and subsequent French intellectual history.<sup>23</sup> If the concept of the sacred failed the desired rigor and specificity of scientific nomenclature, it was nevertheless an influential, even generative failure. The tenet's dissemination throughout the human sciences, especially as they were practiced in France, revealed their links and common concerns—including the nature of magic, desire, transgression, war, taboo, and sacrifice—that transcended their more local disciplinary preoccupations and even hearkened toward a new discourse, if not a new discipline, beyond their established purview. Philosopher Jean Wahl, himself a participant in the College of Sociology, saw in sociology's growing influence the possibility of a new, radical epistemology able to address disparate contemporary intellectual concerns:

Cette sociologie, dont je ne fus jamais un adepte très fervent, la voici qui s'empare d'esprits jeunes, avides de rigueur, qui pensent en elle trouver une réponse à des questions qu'ils ont cru auparavant pouvoir résoudre par le surréalisme, par la révolution, par le freudisme. Il faut tâcher de comprendre ce phénomène, lui-même sociologique.<sup>24</sup>

It is likely that Caillois shared Wahl's view, having established *Le Collège de Sociologie pour l'Etude du Sacré* at the Université de Beauvais in the 1950s, after his publication of *L'homme et le sacré*.

As these erstwhile students of sociology knew, that which permitted comparison of presumably disparate social phenomena were certain underlying

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<sup>23</sup> The considerable impact of French classical sociology on the avant-garde has only recently become the focus of scholarly attention. The surrealists were similarly influenced by sociological studies of religion and the occult, in which they sought a kind creative or artistic mysticism. The chapter "Modernism as a State of Mind" in Celia Rabinovitch's *Surrealism and the Sacred: Power, Eros, and the Occult in Modern Art* (Boulder, Colorado: Icon Editions Westview Press, 2002), for example, examines the notion of sacred ambivalence in surrealist art. The most rigorous and extended examination of sociology on the French avant-garde can be found in Michèle H. Richman, *Sacred Revolutions : Durkheim and the Collège de Sociologie* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Georges Bataille and Denis Hollier, *Le Collège de sociologie : 1937-1939* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), 118.

“religious” qualities seldom stated but implicit; many, if not all, seem to bind human societies on inviolate, sacred practices. Exemplifying this understanding was Marcel Mauss’ concept of the *fait social total*, or “total social fact,” which describes the unintentional and comprehensive socially binding force of disparate everyday actions.<sup>25</sup> Different social phenomena like gift-exchange, sacrifice, magic, war, and exogamy seemed commonly able to provide answers to many fundamental questions: how are society and community possible at all? How does one form social and ethical bonds with another? How are individual and group identity created and undone? How can violence--especially in the forms of war and sacrifice--not simply destroy a society, but provide for its very foundation? Indeed, why do almost all world religions attribute divine significance to violence? What is the apparent, yet elusive link among violence, religion, and social unity? That the French *Ecole sociologique* sought answers to these questions through the study of disparate cultures, time periods, and social practices makes it a kind of testament to the virtues of comparative method. By bringing disparate cultures and social phenomena into comparative perspective, it created a kind of inter-cultural dialogue in which to understand European civilization and its others. But this method and dialogue were by no means restricted to sociology; the sacred also informed new aesthetic and intellectual practices, as evidenced by the College of Sociology and their interdisciplinary interrogations into politics, myth, fascism, history, and philosophy. For figures like Bataille, Leiris, and Colette Peignot (otherwise known as “Laure”), the sacred also came to inform a new practice and understanding of literature.

For the more literary affiliates of the College, then, the sacred was a concept no less dynamic or important. The philosophical questions it prompted concerning

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<sup>25</sup> Mauss’ “total social facts” or *fait sociaux totaux* “sont à la fois juridiques, économiques, religieux, et même esthétiques, morphologiques, etc. Ils sont juridiques, de droit privé et public, de moralité organisée et diffuse, strictement obligatoires ou simplement loués et blâmés, politiques et domestiques en même temps” (Mauss, *Sociologie et anthropologie*, 274).

identity, community, society, and art would become the preoccupation of their literary interests, which they considered a critical part of their endeavor to practice a “sacred sociology.” For Leiris, the writings of Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Balzac, and Nietzsche offered a critique of individualism and a new notion of social existence. Pierre Klossowski saw in Søren Kierkegaard’s translation of *Antigone* a critique of the state and the possibility of revolutionary action experienced as tragedy. René Guastalla outlined a theory for the differing social functions of literature and myth. Jean Paulhan would discuss the “sacred language” of the proverb, and Jules Monnerot would write about the sacred nature of modern poetry. These essayistic forays into the nature of literature endeavored to examine, but more importantly *manifest* the sacred in what they called a “sacred sociology,” which “implique l’étude de l’existence sociale dans toutes celles de ses manifestations où se fait jour la présence active du sacré.”<sup>26</sup> Literature--and especially poetry--was envisioned as an affirmative form of combined aesthetic and political praxis, if not a kind of sacred or erotic ritual. It therefore could yield an experience akin to the narrator’s in *Madame Edwarda*, and this, in its turn, was not unrelated either to the fervor of political revolt or the ethics of community. In this way, literature was seen itself as sacred, as part of a vital and politically significant form of self-creation, an *autopoiesis*, that delivered humanity from the dehumanizing effects of modern life. Such literature might be called a “poetics of the sacred.”

As Bataille writes in his famous essay “La notion de dépense” (1933), for example, both poetry and class revolt are wed to violent sacrifice. Echoing Bataille, Laure writes that poetry is a kind of sacred surrender or “denudation” fostering communion with others: “l’oeuvre poétique est sacré en ce qu’elle est création d’un événement topique, ‘communication’ ressentie comme la nudité; pour que (le sacré)

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<sup>26</sup> Bataille, Georges, and Denis Hollier. *Le Collège de sociologie : 1937-1939*. Paris: Gallimard, 1979, 27.

soit, il faut que cela soit ressentie par les autres, en communion avec d'autres."<sup>27</sup> In his unfinished work *L'homme sans honneur* (1939), Leiris explains that language is sacred when it serves a similar communitarian purpose: "si tout ce qui touche au langage me paraît au moins en quelque mesure, empreint d'un caractère sacré, c'est parce qu'il est de l'essence du langage d'être instrument de communication, de communion."<sup>28</sup> Poetry in particular offers privileged access to the sacred and communal character of language: "Par rapport aux autres genres littéraires [roman, essai, etc.] la poésie—et spécialement la poésie lyrique—fait figure d'art sacré."<sup>29</sup> For these authors, then, the sacred provided a dynamic philosophy in which to conceive a communitarian ethics, a radical politics, and a new literary practice at the same time. As I will show, these issues commonly concern the *shifting nature of subjectivity* as it wavers between personal identity and alterity, selfhood and otherness. These shifts problematize not only the liberal notion of the self-possessed volitional subject, but also the social ties that bind it to others ethically and politically. The intersection of these three issues--identity, ethics, and politics--in the literary practice of these three authors is the focus and argument of this thesis.

These related issues illustrate the sacred's combined historical, theoretical, and literary import in 1930s France. More than a history or revaluation of sacred ambivalence, however, my argument here will reveal how sacred ambivalence actually veils a particular philosophy of identity based on self-sacrifice, one that serves as the common tether binding the issues and authors mentioned above. As I argue in Chapter One, the sacred actually describes not a binaristic ambivalence, but paradoxical process by which a subject is repeatedly recreated, or indeed *performed*, due to the

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<sup>27</sup> Laure and Jérôme Peignot, *Écrits de Laure* (Paris: J.J. Pauvert, 1971), 89.

<sup>28</sup> Michel Leiris and Jean Jamin, *L'homme sans honneur: notes pour le sacré dans la vie quotidienne: transcription et fac-similé* (Paris: J.-M. Place, 1994), 45-6.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

very violence that imperils it. The performative quality of subjectivity common to these authors, I would argue, anticipates the later critical thought of Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and their performative theories of identity. The first chapter of Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power*, for example, offers perhaps the clearest illustration of this philosophy of identity. In the section entitled "Ambivalence," Butler explains that as "a power exerted on a subject, subjection is nevertheless a power assumed by the subject, an assumption that constitutes the instrument of that subjects becoming."<sup>30</sup> That the subject is both enabled and threatened in the process of subjection constitutes an "ambivalence" lying at the very heart of identity.

This ambivalence, I argue, describes the ambivalence came to describe the sacred. For Bataille, Laure, and Leiris' literature alike, the violent dissolution of the subject on the one hand provides for a communitarian existence grounded in death, eroticism, and ecstasy, one celebrated not only by these authors but contemporary figures in European thought.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, however, I would also argue resistantly that this dissolution, once identified through language and literature, outlines--though never completes--the possibility of a reborn subject. Such representation is often figured as embodiment and new life, whereas the failure of

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<sup>30</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 64. Here I am specifically referencing Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Andrew Parker, *Performativity and Performance*, Essays from the English Institute, (New York: Routledge, 1995); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999); and finally Bulter, *The Psychic Life of Power* (mentioned above). Butler offers a clear and thoroughgoing explanation of the phenomenon of subjectivity in the opening chapter of *The Psychic Life of Power* (1-30). Her study of subjection throughout philosophical history argues for a double-bind characterizing the effect of power on the subject.

<sup>31</sup> See Maurice Blanchot, *La communauté inavouable* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1983), Jean-Luc Nancy, *La communauté désœuvrée* (Paris: C. Bourgois, 1986). and Jean-Luc Nancy, *La communauté affrontée*, Collection La philosophie en effet, (Paris: Galilée, 2001). In his celebrated response to Blanchot, Nancy seeks to theorize a notion of community that avoids basing itself on programmatic notions of common interests, agendas, or goals, which he considers to be the wellspring of "collective hypostasis" and, ultimately, fascism. In contrast from community building as a form of work (*oeuvre*), he envisions community (with the help of Bataille) as a form of constant, self-deconstructive "unworking" (*désœuvrement*) that avoids such hypostasis. A more recent foray into the question of community in continental thought is Roberto Esposito's *Communitas: origine e destino della comunità* and *Immunitas: Protezione e Negazione della Vita* (Torino: Einaudi, 1998).

representation contrarily evokes dissolution and death. Thus does a subject take on new identities--sexed, gendered, and raced--in and through the representation of mortal and erotic self-dissolution, such as is seen in *Madame Edwarda*.<sup>32</sup> The mechanism by which the subject in this literature “dies,” only to be reborn into a new identity, is none other than *self-sacrifice*, an oxymoron that fully captures the paradoxical process by which subjectivity is simultaneously expropriated and reappropriated in the pursuit of the sacred: the self, to become a self, gives itself away in sacrifice, and yet this self, by virtue of its sacrificial gift, can never fully be a self at all.<sup>33</sup>

As the vehicle that moves between the life and death of the subject, sacrifice represents “l'accord intime de la mort et de la vie,” to use Bataille's phrase.<sup>34</sup> The

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<sup>32</sup> Bataille criticism since the 1970s has been preoccupied with the question of Bataille's politics. Much of this has to do with the complicated role of sacrifice and myth, which seem to legitimate violence or bear traces of fascist ideology. Many of those who uphold the fascist claim are intellectual historians such as Richard Wolin and Daniel Lindenberg, who commonly detect a certain veneration for the mythology and social *élan* associated with fascist regimes. Agamben has also argued that Bataille, despite his anti-fascist tendencies, actually developed a fascist philosophy in his conception of ecstasy and sovereignty. Bataille's biographer, Michel Surya, contrarily insists on Bataille's radical opposition to fascism despite the sacred social energies it mobilized. The performativity of violence, as I argue in Chapter One, seems to simultaneously challenge and support both views, as the simultaneous condition of possibility for both statehood/subjectivity and revolution. In his introduction to *Visions of Excess*, Bataille scholar and translator Alan Stoekl notes precisely this contradiction in Bataille: “the subversive violence of the masses...could easily be reversed into fascism, as Bataille quickly became aware” (Georges Bataille and Allan Stoekl, *Visions of Excess : Selected Writings, 1927-1939* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985], xviii). Also see Daniel Lindenberg, *Les années souterraines: 1937-1947* (Paris: La Découverte, 1990), Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille, la mort à l'oeuvre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), and Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) and finally Agamben, “Bataille e il paradosso della sovranità,” in *Georges Bataille: il politico e il sacro*, edited by Jacqueline Risset, Napoli: Liguori, 1987, 87-95.

<sup>33</sup> In her recent book *The Hostess: Hospitality, Femininity, and the Expropriation of Identity*, Tracy McNulty exposes this very paradox within the host's hospitable relationships to others. “How can identity,” she asks, “by definition so eminently proper, so thoroughly ‘mine’- be ‘dispossessed’?” Drawing comparatively from the Bible, Kant, Lacan, and other diverse sources, she forcefully argues that this paradox of identity is particularly acute for the host, who, according to “traditional wisdom” is best when he “has given the most, even to the point of giving away that which defines him as master and host” (xx). Chapter One explores this paradox in further depth, specifically within the context of self-sacrifice. See Tracy McNulty, *The Hostess : Hospitality, Femininity, and the Expropriation of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xx, and “Hospitality after the Death of God,” in *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism* 35, no. 1 (2005).

<sup>34</sup> Bataille and Hollier, *Le Collège de sociologie : 1937-1939*, 212.

subject's death and life, in turn, parallel the malignant and beneficial dualism of sacred ambivalence. Given the sacred shift between life and death, the self, bound to the practice of self-sacrifice, remains only a provisional and fictive totality, a "false-identity" or masquerade that testifies as much to the dissolution of subjectivity as it does to its rebirth. In self-sacrifice, the aporetic relationship between the expropriation and reappropriation of identity, death and rebirth, selfhood and otherness--indeed selfhood *as* otherness--gives *performative* significance to the tenet of sacred ambivalence, one that I term the "divination of identity."

Chapter One reconsiders the intellectual history of sacred ambivalence in France, concentrating on its specific meaning and importance for those in and around the College of Sociology, especially Georges Bataille. Bataille's "excessive" conception of the sacred was of decisive importance not only in the work of Michel Leiris and Colette Peignot--his closest intellectual peers--but also in subsequent continental thought, especially in the work of the figures surrounding the revue *Tel Quel* (1960-1983) and, more recently, Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben.<sup>35</sup> Rather than a binaristic concept that "ambivalently" wavers between the adulatory and accursed, the fearsome and the fascinating, I argue that the sacred describes a theory of identity grounded in the performative contradictions of self-sacrifice. While this theory offers an account of how the sacred functions in Bataille's work, it also departs from Bataille's own influential vision of the sacred as a radical expropriation of identity in ecstasy and death. It also challenges both Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben's radically divergent positions on Bataille and the sacred. Whereas for Agamben the sacred signifies an eminently unethical notion of human life as form of radical subjection or living political resource, for Nancy--who is considerably more sympathetic to Bataille--the sacred seems to describe an ethical or communitarian

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<sup>35</sup> See notes 31 and 32 above for the disparity between Nancy and Agamben.

space of alterity (specifically in death). Indeed, for Nancy, community *is* the sacred: “ce qui du sacré, est disparu...révèle au contraire que la communauté elle-même occupe désormais la place du sacré. Elle est le sacré, si on veut.”<sup>36</sup> The disparity of these approaches is useful for tracing a more comprehensive account of the sacred that binds the ethical and the political together. Self-sacrifice, I argue, wavers between these alternatives as both an ethics of alterity and politics of subjectivity, which together constitute an aporetic limit that traces the contours of personal identity.

Chapter Two, “Georges Bataille and the Sacrifice of Gender” draws upon the argument developed in the previous chapter to reevaluate the role and meaning of self-sacrifice and gendered subjectivity in Bataille’s oeuvre. While feminist scholarship has done much to highlight the controversial exemplarity of his female figures, only few have begun to consider Bataille’s usefulness for queer theory and performance studies. I consider feminist and queer criticism alike in a reading of Bataille that creates a dialog, if not a rapprochement, between their respective approaches to Bataille. Bataille’s literary and theoretical conception of the feminine has typically been understood as an “abject” alternative, though not an opposition, to subjectivity and the masculine. Whereas Bataille’s men are typically associated with a restricted economy of subjectivity, reason, life, and law, his women, like Madame Edwarda, often provide the gateway to a general economy of sacred excess, eroticism, ecstasy, and death. In contrast to this more conventional understanding, I argue that gendered identity in Bataille describes less a categoric difference in kind (male/female) than a form of “queer” difference of degree (male  $\approx$  female  $\approx$  queer gender) along a continuum of possible gendered identities, for which the feminine is a provisionally privileged figure.

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<sup>36</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *La communauté désœuvrée*, 86.



Chapter Three, “Laure’s War,” elaborates the argument outlined in previous chapter through a rigorous engagement with the sordid and fragmentary writings of Colette Peignot, *nom de plume* Laure, who remains an underrepresented figure in the French literary avant-garde. As both a political activist and literary compatriot to such figures as Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris, and Simone Weil, her revolutionary politics came to be expressed aesthetically in equally revolutionary forms of poetry, prose, aphorism, and essay. These disparate writings reveal an extended engagement with the notions of the sacred, and sacrifice, which evoke in their turn a “religious” mode of identity performance. The mutability of her characters into subjects varied and multiple, including sovereigns, revolutionaries, and animals, compellingly illustrate the effusive multiplicity implied in self-identity, which is revealed only through various literary practices of sacrifice. Feminine identity in particular undergoes these performative transformations in a way anticipating queer critique. Integral to such transformations is the figure of Nature, which, drawing (as Laure does) upon the thought of D.A.F. de Sade, represents a force of inexorable metamorphosis that compels the continual dissolution and rebirth of the subject. This serial process of dissolution and rebirth inaugurates relations to otherness that shift respectively between the ethics and politics of subjectivity.

The fourth and final chapter, “Autopsies of Autobiography,” considers the self-sacrificial dimensions of autobiography in the early writings of author, ethnographer, and museologist Michel Leiris who, though a close friend to Bataille and Peignot, remained a marginal figure for the College of Sociology. Self-effacement is a well-known paradoxical attribute of his autobiographical auteurism, which I argue evolves from his early embrace of Bretonian surrealism of the 1920s and its pursuit of the occult, unconscious, marvelous, and exotic. Encounters with these effected a sense self-estrangement not unlike the one he would later attribute to autobiography,

ethnographic study, or even experience of the the sacred, to which he tethered the enchantments of everyday life. For many readers, his return to France in 1933 signified an abandonment of ethnography and a return to (surrealist) aestheticism, traces of which can be found in his 1938 address to the College of Sociology “Le sacré dans la vie quotidienne” or even the famed *L’Age d’homme* (1939), his first extended work of autobiography. With this return came the significant influence of his friend Georges Bataille, from whom he self-avowedly tried to distance himself by the 1940s. To be sure, Bataille’s conceptions of violence, eroticism, and the sacred lucidly appear in *Miroir de la tauromachie* (1939), for example, wherein bullfighting, love, and religion become common expressions of the same sublime experience. Challenging the idea of this “aesthetic return,” however, I show how such aestheticism no only persists throughout his surrealist, ethnographic, and autobiographical writings--an established claim in Leiris studies--but also how religiosity and self-sacrifice constitute unrealized and integral features of this aestheticism. The experience of self-sacrifice in turn gives reason to reevaluate not only Leiris’ surrealist roots or autobiography, but also the exoticism characteristic of his early writings on Africa. Confrontations with exotic, marvelous, and sacred objects--for which women and Africa are exemplary--commonly effect an experience of self-dissolution coterminous with self-sacrifice, one that consequentially problematizes the meaning and relationship of these objects to the subject that experiences them. As I will show, the identities of both the subject (Leiris) and the object (women, Africa, etc.) are continually undone, or even “redone,” through such “sacrificial” encounters. As a result, Leiris’ literature not only testifies to the inexhaustibility of the object in sacred experience, but also that of identity itself, whether autobiographical, feminine, or African.

In sum, therefore, the argument that follows represents a fourfold endeavor. First, it illustrates how the doctrine of sacred ambivalence, popularized in the early social sciences, develops into an aporetic notion of identity in interwar French literature. Such identity is based on the paradoxical effects of self-sacrifice on the representation of personal identity. This conception of self-sacrifice is distinguished from--and yet able to explain--Bataille, Laure, and Leiris' own exuberant proclamations of ecstatic, sacrificial self-loss in literature and eroticism. Secondly, the following argument seeks to show how self-sacrifice not only plays an integral role in the history of poststructuralist critique, but also how it anticipates more recent performative theories of the subject, especially as they account for the (de-) construction of sexed, gendered, authorial, and raced identities. Third, it shows how the literature of the authors here considered serves as a case-in-point for the second proposition above. Lastly, it is to offer a reevaluation of "the sacred" as it is understood and applied in contemporary criticism and theory. Through the lasting influence of figures surrounding *Tel Quel* and their advocacy for the work of Georges Bataille, the sacred has come to signify a form of radical expenditure, abjection, and expropriation without end on the one hand; on the other, it has come to signify the dialectical resolution of violence into social identity, especially in the work of René Girard and his adherents in the Colloquium on Violence and Religion.<sup>37</sup> The account that follows represents what I hope to be third, alternate account of the concept of "the sacred" within the literary and intellectual history of 20th century France.

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<sup>37</sup> Girard holds the genesis of archaic religion--and indeed social order itself--to reside in the violent sacrificial expulsion of one element of what he calls the "mimetic double": the two conflicting people, parties, or forces that desire the same power and influence in a society. This "mimetic desire" begins with covetousness or envy but resolves itself in the purgation of one party through violence. On the one hand, this violence threatens the society itself and yet, once completed, restores unity. The "ambivalence of the sacred" thus describes the victor, who represents simultaneously the origin of violence and its resultant end in peace. Girard's conception of the sacred is strictly dialectical, since the "monstrous double" always resolves itself through violence into a peaceable unity. See Girard, *La violence et le sacré* (above) and René Girard, Jean-Michel Oughourlian, and Guy Lefort, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1978).

## CHAPTER I

### THE SACRED: FROM AMBIVALENCE TO APORIA

*Au départ, une opposition calme à la violence n'aurait pas suffi...si l'opposition n'avait elle-même en quelque manière participé de la violence.*<sup>1</sup>

-Georges Bataille, *L'érotisme*

*Le sacré unit en lui tous les contraires non parce qu'il diffère de la violence mais parce que la violence paraît différer d'elle-même...*<sup>2</sup>

-René Girard, *Violence et le sacré*

*The subject who would oppose violence, even violence to itself, is itself the effect of a prior violence without which the subject could not have emerged.*<sup>3</sup>

-Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*

**Introduction.** The tenet of sacred ambiguity arises in Benveniste's famed linguistic study *Le vocabulaire des institutions européennes* as a lexical dualism. Again, Benveniste argues that this dualism describes two aspects of "the same notion" (*deux aspects de la même notion*), suggesting a relationship between them that is somehow united or complementary. In an 1938 lecture at the College of Sociology, Caillouis seems to echo Benveniste's assertion above by describing the furtive singularity that underlies sacred ambiguity. "On peut saisir," he writes, "un état où elle est composée indissolublement avec d'autres antagonismes qui s'anastomosent et

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<sup>1</sup> Georges Bataille, *L'érotisme* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1957), 90.

<sup>2</sup> René Girard, *La violence et le sacré* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1972), 386.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power : Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 64.

s'interpénètrent plus qu'ils ne se laissent ordonner ou distinguer."<sup>4</sup> It is, I would argue, this unspoken and more elusive "singular" notion with which Bataille, Laure, and Leiris were ultimately concerned. What this more comprehensive "state" or "notion" exactly is for Benveniste is unclear; for him, it remains a general comparative deduction from the various vocabularies he considers. Yet, drawing upon his analysis, I would claim that this more comprehensive state might be found in the meaning of "divine power" (*la puissance divine*) itself. It is this state, a state more complex than one of simple ambivalence, that I would argue undergirds the conception of sacred that gained such currency in among members of the College of Sociology and indeed subsequent continental thought. Though muted in Benveniste's own etymological analysis, the meaning and function of divine power becomes potentially clearer upon closer analysis.

Rather than the general omnipotence traditionally accorded to the gods, the principle attribute of divine power seems to inhere more specifically in the ability to bestow vitality, life, and health—or take it away. Benveniste's examination of the various Indo-European vocabularies attests to this. The Avestan adjective *sura* ("strength"), for example, describes a divine force or attribute, one belonging to gods like Zarathustra. Similarly, the English words "whole," "hail," and "holy," linked to the German *heilig* ("holy," "sacred"), all derive from the ancient Gothic *hails*, a semi-religious salutation (L. *salus*) meaning variously "health," "wholeness," and "physical integrity." The Greek term *heiros* itself derives from the Vedic word *israh*, which could be translated as "vital force."<sup>5</sup> Echoing Durkheim before him, Benveniste tells us that the Latin *sacer* refers to that which is whole, an "absolute quantity, having no

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<sup>4</sup> Georges Bataille and Denis Hollier, *Le Collège de sociologie : 1937-1939* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), 399. Cailliois' essay, presented to the College in 1937 by Bataille, draws heavily from Durkheim's analysis in *Les formes élémentaires* and the predecessor to his later *L'homme et le sacré*.

<sup>5</sup> Girard, *La violence et le sacré*, 392.

degrees,” and the derivative *sacerrimus* describes that which is “sacred beyond all else.” Similarly, The Vedic root *su-*, *sva-* refers to “growth” or “swelling” (*se gonfler*) in the sense of physical prosperity, fecundity, and strength. Again, the Greek verb *kuein* (“to be pregnant”) is likewise cognate with *kuma* (“swelling”), *kuros* (“strength,” “sovereignty”), and the adjective *kurios*: “sovereign.”<sup>6</sup> Benveniste’s divine power, it would seem, refers more specifically to that salubrious life-force that grants and governs health, specifically in the sense of *bodily integrity*.

As the above suggests, the doctrine of sacred ambivalence seems to veil a more fundamental concept lying at the heart of Benveniste’s analysis of the sacred, one found in the “divine potential” (*puissance divine*) of which he speaks. Rather than a case of simple ambivalence, the supposedly opposing aspects of the sacred actually seem to trace two sides of an aporetic limit, “deux aspects de la même notion.” On the one hand, the sacred refers to that dangerous, intractable divine potential able to affect life and bodily integrity. For this reason, it is taboo and must be kept at an apotropaic distance. On the other hand, the sacred is itself the very potential that “embodies”: it is the divine power of incarnation and incorporation, the salutary force that gives life and makes bodily integrity possible. According to the aporetic logic this implies, an *excess* of life is tantamount to mortality and disease, and excessive death, conversely, equals health and the exuberance of life. The supposed “ambivalence of the sacred” evinces an *aporia* in which the forces of life and death become both complementary and antagonistic. As that which imperils life and gives it at the same time, indeed imperils life *insofar* as it is given, divine power seems to inhere specifically in the potential to *bestow life through death and/or death through life*. The ontological excess--in a word,

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<sup>6</sup> Emile Benveniste and Jean Lallot, *Le Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1969), 187. Translations are mine. The German word *heilen*, “health,” curiously absent from Benveniste’s study, has retained both its religious and salubrious value, meaning at once “to heal,” “to redeem,” or “to save.” Derrida makes much of this in Jacques Derrida, *Foi et Savoir, suivi de Le Siecle et le Pardon* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1996), 73.

the *violence*--that overturns the dualism of life and death, existence and non-existence: such is meaning of the sacred.

As Benveniste's reference to the Greek *kurios* suggests, this is not unrelated to the ancient notion of *sovereignty*. The power of the sovereign is not unlike God's own, insofar as he to is empowered with the ability to decide life and death.<sup>7</sup> To be sure, this is an ancient idea, and one that spans wider than its representation within Indo-European vocabularies. Yahweh possesses this power in Job 1: 20-1, for example, which in turn echoes the Mosaic law of Deuteronomy 30:19: "Naked I came from my mother's womb / naked shall I return again / Yahweh gave, Yahweh has taken away / Blessed be the name of Jahweh." The very same "sovereign power" was given to the Roman *pater familias*; Hobbes writes that sovereignty evolved from the Roman law of *patria potestas* that permitted the father to take life, and thereby, through the deferral of this taking, obversely grant a "prior" right to life. He thus has "monopoly over the organization of violence." Alluding to Hobbes, Michel Foucault similarly claims that the sovereign "lui avait donné [la vie], il pouvait la leur retirer."<sup>8</sup> The kindred "biopower" (as Foucault terms it) shared between the royal and the divine alike not only describes the governance of life and death, but also the violent, liminal space between them that gods and kings occupy in their common sovereignty.

In the early 20th century human sciences, the power over life and death is identified as constitutive feature of what sociologists called the "sacred king"; While notable figures like Arthur M. Hocart and Gerardus van der Leeuw contributed to the understanding of this notion, James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (1890) offers likely the most influential and well-known account, one that Bataille and other members of the College knew well and frequently cited. Frazer argues that all ancient religions

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<sup>7</sup> *The New Jerusalem Bible*. New York: Doubleday, 1990.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 177.

were originally fertility cults that organized time around the sacrifice of a sacred king, who himself embodied the vital powers of the tribe.<sup>9</sup> This sacrifice not only effected a communal life between the tribe and the god, therefore, but also maintained the life of the tribe and god themselves. This notion was powerfully influential for the College of Sociology, since it explains the integral nature of sovereignty, revolution, and community at the same time. The power of the sacred king, his sovereignty, is the very life of his subjects, and this fact is most strikingly revealed in his sacrificial death. Thus Bataille--who himself elaborates a more idiosyncratic theory of sovereignty in *La part maudite*--makes much of sacrificing the godly “heads” of state in the figure of the acephale man (**Figures 2.1-2.3**). Leiris speaks of the conferral of “sacred prestige” through the confrontation with death in *Miroir de la tauromachie* and *L’homme sans honneur*, and Caillois asserts in *L’homme et le sacré* that “tout roi est dieu, descend d’un dieu, ou règne par la grâce d’un dieu.”<sup>10</sup> As much as it is a religious concept, therefore, the sacred describes a “biopolitical” concept that commonly circumscribes the subject and sovereign in a vicious circle of life and death. Both the sovereign and his subjects are ultimately “subject” to this cycle, insofar as both commonly result from the cyclical work of sacred excess. This understanding of the sacred explains the possible reason for the ambivalence historically associated with the concept, while providing a more accurate illustration of its conceptual import. It also marks the key

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<sup>9</sup> See James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough : A Study in Magic and Religion*, 3rd ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990). Frazer was a prominent influence in the work of Durkheim and Mauss (as well as many Anglo-American modernist authors like Eliot, Lawrence, and Joyce). Bataille will echo the concept of the sacred king in his “Structure psychologique du fascisme,” where he speaks of the “heterogeneous” (i.e., sacred, violent) character of fascist movements, whose affectivity culminates in the figure of the head of state (*chef*). “Le flux affectif qui l’unit à ses partisans--qui prend la forme d’une identification morale de ceux-ci à celui qu’ils suivent (et réciproquement)--est fonction de la conscience commune de pouvoirs et d’énergies de plus en plus violents, de plus en plus démesurés qui s’accumulent dans la personne du chef et deviennent en lui indéfiniment disponibles” (Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Michel Foucault, vol. I [Paris: Gallimard, 1970], 350). While Bataille argues that fascism betrays its heterogeneous origins by becoming a military state concretized in the head of state (*chef*), it is nevertheless the case that fascism represents a possible *appropriation* of these energies not unlike--as I argue below--the one found in sacrifice.

<sup>10</sup> Roger Caillois, *L’homme et le sacré*, 3 ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), 119.



difference between Agamben's sacred and that of the French history of which Benveniste and Bataille part; as I will explain shortly, the former describes a "broken circularity" between life and death, whereas the latter makes such circularity a *sine qua non* condition: life through death and/or death through life. Again, as Bataille says of existence in *L'expérience intérieure*, "ce qui seul demeure est l'agitation circulaire--qui ne s'épuise pas dans l'extase et recommence à partir d'elle."<sup>11</sup> While being mindful of the intellectual and literary differences among members of the College of Sociology,<sup>12</sup> I would argue that this aporetic conception gestured in Benveniste's study that persists in various ways throughout the work of Bataille, Laure, and Leiris, even despite their own overtures to ambiguity and ambivalence.

Indeed, the stage is set for such an aporetic conception of the sacred well before Benveniste, and even before Bataille. Marcel Mauss himself plants the seed for this excessive conception in his account of sacrifice, to which he "rattacher la théorie de la renaissance." The "vertu vivifiante du sacrifice," he explains, "ne se limite pas à la vie d'ici bas, elle s'est étendue à la vie future."<sup>13</sup> Such reversals already anticipate

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<sup>11</sup> Georges Bataille, *L'expérience intérieure* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 129-30.

<sup>12</sup> To be sure, the members of Acephale and the College varied in their approach to and understanding of the sacred. While Colette Peignot's evocation of the sacred is likely the closest to Bataille's own, for example, Caillois strongly doubted its feasibility and value as a truly meaningful catalyst of socio-political change. Indeed, he kept distance from much of the College's efforts: "J'étais le plus réticent du groupe" he would later write in an autobiographical note (Bataille and Hollier, *Le Collège de sociologie* : 1937-1939, 296). As evidenced by *Miroir* and "Le sacré dans la vie quotidienne," Leiris primarily valued the sacred as an aesthetic and phenomenological concept, though he does acknowledge the ethical and political import that Bataille sought in it in the interwar years.

<sup>13</sup> Marcel Mauss and Viktor Karady, *Oeuvres, vol. I: Les fonctions sociales du sacré* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1968), 268-9. Mauss echoes this aporetic formulation in his description of the executioner. "Sacrifices of sacralization," he explains, "convient également à ceux qui on pour effet non pas de créer de toutes pièces un caractère sacré chez le sacrifiant, mais simplement d'augmenter un caractère préexistant. Mais il n'est pas rare que l'homme qui va sacrifier se trouve déjà marquée d'un caractère sacré, d'où résultent des interdictions rituelles qui peuvent être contraire à ses desseins" (Ibid., 258). In other words, the sacralization of the victim achieved through sacrifice is not unlike the preexisting state of the executioner himself, which is augmented through the sacrificial act. The sacred death of the victim essentially magnifies the "sacred life" of the executioner, which in turn protects the life of the tribe. In his recent book *Law and Sacrifice*, Johan Van der Walt makes an analogous observation concerning the simultaneously destructive and creative qualities of sacrifice in Mauss. See "Law and Sacrifice" in Johan Willem Gous Van der Walt, *Law and Sacrifice : Towards a Post-Apartheid Theory of Law* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2005).

Bataille's appropriation of Mauss and later theory of sovereignty in *La part maudite*; they are at work in Bataille's valorization of the king's beheading or the intimacy between executioner and victim, whereby a common experience of death festively animates life. It is the characteristic "l'approbation de la vie jusque dans la mort" of his eroticism, which "soit d'abord une exubérance de la vie," although it "n'est pas étranger à la mort."<sup>14</sup> It is also Caillois' implication when he writes in *L'homme et le sacré* that "tel apparaît le sacré[:]. Il émane du monde obscur du sexe et de la mort, mais il est le principe essentiel de la vie et la source de toute efficacité... toujours égale à elle-même, dangereuse et indispensable à la fois."<sup>15</sup> When Jules Monnerot writes that "le pouvoir existe, arbitraire. C'est une grâce qui est donné. Le pouvoir est la force sacrée dont il ne peut y avoir de raisons, puisque les raisons sont après elle, non avant. Au-dessous, non au dessus,"<sup>16</sup> he refers to a power that, much like Aristotle's divine unmoved mover (*ho theos*), is self-grounded as its own condition of possibility. It is "its own reason," the reason for its own existence, which both catalyzes and impedes its own becoming; thus "le héraut du pouvoir... n'est pas une chose qu'on a mais une chose qu'on est."<sup>17</sup> The hero's power *is* his very life. This is not unlike Leiris' heroic matador in *Miroir de la tauromachie*, who "[incorpore] la mort à la vie" through "les parages hasardeux d'un seuil aussi étroit qu'un tranchant de rasoir," which "mince zone d'interférence" between life and death, "qui constituerait le domaine par excellence du sacré."<sup>18</sup> Colette Peignot similarly will call sacred the "permanence de la menace de la mort," which "est l'absolu enivrant qui emport la vie,

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<sup>14</sup> Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Michel Foucault, vol. 10 (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 17.

<sup>15</sup> Caillois, *L'homme et le sacré*, 203.

<sup>16</sup> Georges Bataille, et. al., *Acephale : religion, sociologie, philosophie, 1936-1939* (Paris: J.M. Place, 1995) July 1937, no. 9, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Georges Bataille, et. al., *Acephale : religion, sociologie, philosophie, 1936-1939*, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Michel Leiris, *Miroir de la tauromachie* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1981), 65.

la soulève hors d'elle-même, projette au dehors le fond de moi-même.”<sup>19</sup> The *excessive* quality of the sacred, that which deconstructs the opposition between life and death, is more than simply ambiguous because of the mutually prior conditionality inherent to its presumably ambiguous alternatives. Within this context, as that which exceeds life in death, death in life, the life that seeks its own death reveals *self-sacrifice* to be the quintessential expression of the sacred. All life, death, and rebirth is thus beholden to the same process of self-sacrifice due to the self-deconstructive nature of sacred excess. For better or for worse, all life and death thus becomes self-sacrificial. Self-sacrifice so conceived reveals the due nuance obscured by the tenet of sacred ambiguity, while offering a rejoinder to Agamben’s hasty dismissal of its accuracy and theoretical import in his book *Homo Sacer*.

***Agamben’s Exception.*** Whereas Levi-Strauss and Hugette Fugier argue for historicity and a general philological wariness for the study of the sacred, Agamben dismisses the doctrine of sacred ambivalence *tout court* as the unfortunate effect of a secular, squeamish, and timid bourgeoisie trying to come to terms with uncanny religious facts. Unable to consider such realities under rigorous intellectual scrutiny, Durkheim’s and Smith’s use of “ambivalence” ultimately describes their own vague affective reactions to them. As a result, these sociologists, in a kind of quasi-orientalist gesture, simply supplanted scientific truth with more intimate personal reactions. He dismisses Durkheim’s account of the sacred, for example, as “the psychologization of religious experience,” “the ‘disgust’ and ‘horror’ by which the cultured European bourgeoisie betrays its own unease before the religious fact.”<sup>20</sup> This unsubstantiated opinion, coupled with brief mention of Fugier, provides Agamben with the fodder necessary to dismiss the concept of sacred ambivalence as a misrepresentation of the

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<sup>19</sup> Laure and Jérôme Peignot, *Ecrits de Laure* (Paris: J.J. Pauvert, 1971), 85.

<sup>20</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer : Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 78.

sacred that carries forth in subsequent European intellectual history. He claims it “compromised” Bataille’s thinking on the concept of sovereignty, for example, and that it ruefully found its way even into Benveniste’s own venerable 1969 study. He also cites Freud and Caillois as unwitting victims of this concept, which, agreeing with Levi-Strauss, lost its “immediate intelligibility” and “like all empty terms,” became “overburdened with contradictory meanings.” As a result, he claims, it lent itself to widespread abuse and misappropriation and, more importantly, obscured its hidden juridical meaning and force to the detriment of political thought. “An assumed ambivalence of the generic religious category of the sacred,” he claims, “cannot explain the juridico-political phenomenon to which the most ancient meaning of the term *sacer* refers.”<sup>21</sup>

Seeking to correct this error, Agamben supplants the tenet of sacred ambiguity with this more “ancient meaning,” wherein “the sacred” (specifically the Latin *sacer*) describes a life banished from social sphere and its juridical safeguards. Taking his cue from Ernout-Meillet and Benveniste, he draws the meaning of *sacer* from Roman statesman Pompeius Festus, who in *De verborum significatione* writes: “*at homo sacer est, quem populus iudicavit ob maleficium; neque fas est eum immolari, sed qui occidit, parricidi non damnatur,*” or “‘sacred man’ is used to describe a person whom the people have judged on account of a grave crime; it is against the law (*neque fas*) to sacrifice this man (*immolari*), yet he who kills him (*occidit*) will not be condemned for murder (*parricidi*).”<sup>22</sup> Consequentially, *homo sacer* seems doubly excluded by the law, since such a life may be killed—but neither murdered nor sacrificed. In other words, as a criminal, *homo sacer* has transgressed the law as a criminal, but having so

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>22</sup>Pompeius Sextus Festus, *De verborum significatione*, vol. 2 (London: AJ Valpy, 1826), 797. Benveniste offers a revealing analysis of the religious qualities of the Latin *fas* in Benveniste and Lallot, *Le Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, 133-45.

transgressed, the similarly transgressive juridical categories of murder and sacrifice--i.e., *unjustified* and *justified* death--no longer apply. What remains according to Agamben is a kind of life that can die without any juridical consequence, a life that is essentially ready-to-die in the manner of sovereign's subjects: *zoe*, or "bare life."

Agamben's argument merits brief recapitulation of the classical theory of sovereignty. As Thomas Hobbes explains, the defining characteristics of the sovereign are that he may "maketh his children to submit themselves, and their children, to his government, as being able to destroy them if they refuse; or by war subdueth his enemies to his will, giving them their lives on that condition." He has therefore the "monopoly on the organization of violence." The life of the subject (or enemy) is little more than the sovereign's deferral of its death, making death therefore not only the end but the very precondition of the life of the subject.<sup>23</sup> This is the connection that permits Agamben to align the sacred with sovereignty, insofar as both *juridically* constitute life as the potential to die *without juridical consequence*. Both the sacred and sovereignty make the exception to the rule the rule itself, to paraphrase Agamben. Such is the juridical paradox to which his concepts sovereignty and sacred/bare life refer: "The sovereign sphere," he writes, "is the sphere in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice, and sacred life...is the life that has been captured in this sphere."<sup>24</sup>

Thus when Agamben posits sovereignty and the sacred within this sphere, he seeks to evoke a state of static immanence, an "arrested dialectic" not only between the legal and illegal, but existence and non-existence, life and death. The result might be called "a-legal" death, death without juridical qualification. The first step in this deadly double negation is (1) the *juridical delimitation* of violence into legitimate and

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas Hobbes, Richard E. Flathman, and David Johnston, *Leviathan : Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Interpretations*, Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 1997), XVII.

<sup>24</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer : Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 83.

illegitimate spheres (*nomos/anomie*; law/nature; sacred/profane; etc.); the second is (2) the *juridical interdependence* of legitimate and the illegitimate violence, which closes the gap between law-preserving and law-threatening violence (the “state of emergency,” “rogue states,” “extraordinary rendition,” etc.); and the third (3) is the *alegality of violence* which, through the synthesis suggested above, refers paradoxically to both (a) violence unlimited by any form or law and (b) the constitution of law *itself* as unlimited violence. Sovereignty and the sacred for Agamben characterize a progressive and ineluctable state of immanence--a “zone of indistinction,” “state of exception,” etc.--for which there is no way out. It is Agamben’s forceful thinking about immanence that makes his analyses of law, animality, and the sacred so provocative; yet this immanence also has a way of homogenizing all difference in a way that obscures the historicity and nuance of many of the examples he interrogates, as many critics have suggested. I would include the *Ecole sociologique* and College of Sociology among these.

To the degree that Agamben like Fugier emphasizes Pompeius Festus’ definition of the sacred as particular to Roman law and Latin, one that should not be conflated (like sacred ambivalence) with different juridico-religious concepts or histories, it is ironic that Agamben does precisely this throughout *Homo Sacer*, with its analyses of medieval political theology, Salic, Semitic, Ripuarian, and Nazi sterilization law as steps on the same warpath of modernity. If an erroneous ambiguity has overshadowed Festus’ account, the sacred’s “true” meaning for Agamben, it is equally possible *mutatis mutandis* that Agamben has dismissed contradictory evidence or alternative formulations of the sacred--as well as his related concepts of *zoe*, sovereignty, the ban, etc.--with his privileging of this single Roman source, one formulation among many in

Benveniste's study and Western history more broadly.<sup>25</sup> According to Agamben's history, an elusive Roman juridical concept becomes a teleological and transhistoric metanarrative that culminates in the death camps and biometric systems of identification.<sup>26</sup> If the mythic transhistory of sacred ambivalence is to blame for obscuring Roman law and the meaning of *sacer*, the latter seems to become equally mythic and transhistorical in the form of "bare life" which, given Agamben's teleological history, dismisses if not *misrepresents* the meaning of the sacred (*le sacré*) specific to the French avant-garde, especially Bataille.

The most significant instance of this misrepresentation can be found in an short, somewhat cryptic 1989 essay anticipating his argument in *Homo Sacer* entitled "Bataille e il paradosso della sovranità," or "Bataille and the Paradox of Sovereignty" (see Appendix). The essay endeavors to explain why Walter Benjamin, after hearing Bataille at a meeting of the College of Sociology, exclaimed to him "You are working for fascism!" Agamben rightly considers this to be ironic, since Benjamin knew Bataille to be resolutely antifascist and was, like him, an unorthodox Marxist who sought to "broaden the theoretico-practical horizon of Marxism" (*ampliare l'orizzonte teorico-prattico del marxismo*).<sup>27</sup> Though Agamben admonishes that he does not have an immediate response to this question, Agamben works through

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<sup>25</sup> Many have commented on Agamben's dubious appropriation of history and juridical concepts. J.C. Van der Walt has noted, for example, that the Latin *immolare* was only a particular form of sacrifice, one that did not summarily refer to all forms of sacrifice in Rome. See Van der Walt, *Law and Sacrifice : Towards a Post-Apartheid Theory of Law*, 127-30.

<sup>26</sup> In 2004, Agamben refused an offer to teach in New York due to the National Security Agency's fingerprint identification requirement for traveler's visas. See Giorgio Agamben, "Non au tatouage biopolitique," *Le Monde*, October 10th, 2004.

<sup>27</sup> ———, "Bataille e il paradosso della sovranità," in *Georges Bataille: il politico e il sacro*, ed. Jacqueline Risset (Napoli: Liguori, 1987), 115. I would like to thank Andrea Righi for his aid with the translations from Italian. Agamben's argument in this early essay strongly anticipates that of historian Richard Wolin in *The Seduction of Unreason : The Intellectual Romance with Fascism : from Nietzsche to Postmodernism*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004. He similarly cites Benjamin's declaration as cause for looking further into the potentially fascist tendencies of Bataille's sacred communitarianism, which he calls a "left-fascism."

Bataille's theory of community with the help of Maurice Blanchot and Jean-Luc Nancy to theorize a response. Ultimately, Agamben finds Bataille's fascist tendency within the theoretical kinship between community and sovereignty, which are for him grounded in a form of mortal suspension that, in *Homo Sacer*, he will call "bare life." What seems to be an explanation for Benjamin's thinking, therefore, becomes actually a foray into his own.

To make this connection, Agamben briefly recapitulates Blanchot and Nancy's elaboration of Bataillan community in *La communauté inavouable* and *La communauté désœuvrée* respectively.<sup>28</sup> Agamben, drawing upon Blanchot and Nancy, explains that Bataille's community is not founded on "a common assumption" (*presupposto comune*) and has nothing to do with commonly interested people working toward a common goal, or any of the work that builds the community itself. Such is the vision of community posited by communism or fascism, which commonly assume a homogenous group with a common project. Bataille's theory of community precludes communism and fascism because, as Nancy explains, it refuses the "immanence of man to man" (*immanenza assoluta dell'uomo all'uomo*) within a larger group, or the quality of "any communal fusion into a collective hypostasis" (*ogni comunione fusionale in una ipostasi collettiva*) as Agamben puts it,

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<sup>28</sup> See Maurice Blanchot, *La communauté inavouable* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1983). In his celebrated response to Blanchot, Nancy seeks to theorize a notion of community that avoids basing itself on programmatic notions of common interests, agendas, or goals, which considers to be the wellspring of "collective hypostasis" and, ultimately, fascism. In contrast from community building as a form of work (*oeuvre*), he envisions community (with the help of Bataille) as a form of constant, self-deconstructive "unworking" (*désœuvrement*) that avoids such hypostasis. In *Politiques de l'amitié*, Derrida emphasizes the self-defeating nature of their approach, which he believes signals the dead-end of community in a kind of frozen paradox. Supplanting this approach with the messianism he initially theorizes in *Force de la loi* and continues throughout his later thought, he offers a more hopeful and utopian vision of a "community to come" (see Jacques Derrida, *Politiques de l'amitié ; suivi de L'oreille de Heidegger*, Collection La Philosophie en effet, [Paris: Galilée, 1994], 98-100). The messianicity of community, like that of democracy, neither presumes nor predetermines the form a community is to take, and in this way, Derrida's thinking is sympathetic to Nancy's efforts, even though he tries to theorize community as an open possibility rather than simply the effect of death. Despite his avowed departure from the Bataille-Blanchot-Nancy frame of thought, it is possible (as I will show) to detect the same kind of performativity in their thinking on community and the sacred.



echoing Nancy.<sup>29</sup> In other words, members of a Bataillian community are never *additive* and they never constitute a sum. Agamben rightly explains that Bataille alternatively posits the idea of a “negative community” that is made possible through the experience of death and whose efforts cannot be transformed into a form of a “communal substance or work” (*una sostanza o in un’opera comune*).<sup>30</sup> Predicated on the common and communal experience of death, Bataille’s community precludes the possibility of “community building,” so to speak, since the realization of death realizes nothing, the nothing that *is* death. Bataille’s community is thus “based in some way on the impossibility of community” (*riposa cioè, in qualche modo, nell’impossibilità della comunità*) as Agamben says, making it according to Bataille’s formulation “the community of those who have no community” (*comunità di coloro che non hanno comunità*).<sup>31</sup>

This “antinomic structure” (*struttura antinomica*) of Bataillian community--that community is achieved in its failure--provides Agamben with a theoretical paradigm he connects with Bataille’s articulation of ecstasy and sovereignty. Like the community that is realized through the “unrealization” of death, the subject in a state of ecstasy is somehow beyond itself to itself (Grk. *ekstasis*). Agamben puts it, “the subject must be there where it cannot be, or, vice versa, that it must be missing there where it must be present” (*il soggetto deve essere là dove non può essere, o, viceversa, che egli deve mancare là dove dev’essere presente*).<sup>32</sup> Given that the experience of death is the essence of ecstasy for Bataille, ecstasy comes closest to achieving the paradoxical position of being-there-where-it-is-not. At the juncture of life and death,

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<sup>29</sup> Agamben, “Bataille e il paradosso della sovranità,” 116.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. This is Bataille’s own expression (*communauté de ceux qui n’ont pas de communauté*), which is cited by Nancy and Blanchot alike.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 117.

identity and otherness, Agamben explains that ecstasy brings the subject closest to what Bataille called “the sovereignty of being” (*la souveraineté de l'être*) or the “sovereign operation” (*l'opération souveraine*), which Bataille explains “ne tient que d'elle-même son autorité, expie en même temps cette autorité.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, the fusion of life and death in ecstatic experience, the experience of death, brings the subject closest to the very operation of Being, which one might say “holds dominion” over the regimes of existence and non-existence. Bataille’s formulation of sovereignty might therefore be called in short the “rule” over life and death.

It is at this moment in the argument where Agamben begins to depart from the Bataillan schema and inject the argument he was concurrently developing for *Homo Sacer*. This also marks (I would say) Agamben’s misappropriation of Bataille, which is made in the service of his own position. He associates Bataille’s ecstatic concept of sovereignty--the paradox of being-there-where-it-is-not, living-there-where-it-dies, etc.--with Carl Schmitt’s formulation of sovereignty in *Political Theology*. For Schmitt, the “Sovereign is he who decides on the exception,” meaning that the sovereign is he who can decide the exception to the laws he nevertheless embodies and safeguards.<sup>34</sup> Citing Schmitt’s idea of the exception, Agamben aligns Schmittian

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. (Agamben’s citation). It is important to note that Bataille’s conception of sovereignty differs sharply from the Hobbesian version described above. Whereas Hobbes classical definition of sovereignty describes the exceptional status of the sovereign being “above the law,” able to use otherwise unlawful violence in defense of the law, Bataille posits sovereignty within the ontology of existence itself as that part of “human” being that cannot be used or appropriated for any end, political or otherwise. In essence, sovereignty for Bataille represents a form of expropriative violence that contravenes all law, accumulation, and autonomy. “Profondément,” writes Bataille, “la souveraineté n’a jamais rien de personnel. Seule une valeur personnelle est en jeu dans la décision qui oppose l’accumulation...et la consommation” (Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 8, 350).

<sup>34</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology : Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), 5-6. He explains “the exception, which is not codified in the existing legal order, can at best be characterized as a case of extreme peril, a danger to the existence of the state, or the like.” In other words, the sovereign can suspend the law or make exceptions to it in moments of urgency without hypocrisy, since it is his own exceptional character that enables his ability to decide the legal and illegal in the first place. As Schmitt himself explains, sovereignty is therefore a “borderline concept” (*Grenzbegriff*), one that Agamben finds analogous to the Bataillan concept of ecstasy. Based on the concept of excess, however, ecstasy is to be distinguished from the more resolute exceptional space of the sovereign.

sovereignty with Bataille's "sovereign operation." "The paradox of sovereignty," Agamben writes echoing his account of Bataille's ecstasy, "can also be formulated thus: 'the law is outside itself; it is itself outside the law,' or 'I myself, the sovereign, being outside the law, declare that there is nothing outside the law'" (*si può anche formulare in questo modo: la legge è fuori di se stessa, e fuori della legge; ovvero: io, il sovrano, che sono fuori-legge, dichiaro che non c'è fuori-legge*).<sup>35</sup> Ultimately, Agamben seeks to link, if not render synonymous, Bataille's concept of *ecstasy* with Schmitt's concept of *exception*.

Given the uncanny juridical similarities between ecstasy and exception, Agamben's insight is a provocative one. Indeed, both signify a certain transgressive state beyond law and life, and both concern the constitutive limits of life and death. Bataille's valorious *anomie* echoes Schmitt's state of exception, and Bataille's thinking on taboo and transgression likewise posits the origin of law in violence and death, those things which the law presumably excludes. And, like Schmitt, sovereignty in Bataille results from a certain embrace of anomic violence. Nevertheless, Bataille is careful to distinguish sovereignty *qua* exception from his own notion, which (in part) describes liberation from the state of being a passive, servile thing in a world of work and utility. Sovereignty restores the subject to an "inner" state of disindividuation (like death) prior to and exceeding subjectivity itself; yet this state is not "exceptional," insofar as it recognizes sovereignty as a "general" and "shared" condition of humanity itself. In other words, sovereignty for Bataille is a state of multiplicity, or else of nothing. In *La part maudite*, Bataille writes:

La souveraineté traditionnelle est soulignée d'une façon voyante. C'est la *souveraineté de l'exception* (un sujet seul, entre autres, a les prérogatives de l'ensemble des sujets). *Au contraire*, le sujet quelconque maintenant

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<sup>35</sup> Agamben, "Bataille e il paradosso della sovranità," 117.

la valeur souveraine opposée à la subordination de l'objet possédé cette valeur *en partage* avec tous les hommes. C'est l'homme en général, dont l'existence participe nécessairement du sujet, *qui s'oppose* en générale aux choses, et par exemple aux animaux, qu'il tue et qu'il mange.<sup>36</sup>

For Bataille, sovereignty signifies a uniquely human kind of *ontological suspension* or withdrawal from "thinghood." If it is "exceptional" at all, it is so only insofar as it is irreducible to the useful world of things and shares such irreducibility with other men communally. Nevertheless, Agamben dismisses Bataille's formulation of sovereignty in deference to Schmitt's by emphasizing the *juridical suspension* characteristic of the latter's state of exception, which structures the law specifically through the combined exclusion of and potential for anomic violence. Such a move suggests that sovereignty becomes a new form of radical subjection wherein the potential to die becomes the necessary precondition for the life of the individual subject. In essence, ecstasy in Bataille becomes for Agamben Schmitt's sovereign exception:

Se questo è il paradosso della sovranità, possiamo dire, allora, che Bataille, nel suo appassionato tentativo di pensare la comunità, sia riuscito a spezzarne il circolo? Cercando di pensare al di là del soggetto, cercando di pensare l'estasi del soggetto, egli ha pensato, in verità, soltanto il suo limite interno, la sua antinomia costitutiva: la sovranità del soggetto, l'esser sopra di ciò che è sotto. E certo che Bataille stesso si è reso conto di questa difficoltà.

(If indeed the paradox of sovereignty is such, could we say then that Bataille, in his passionate attempt to think about community, successfully broke its circularity? By seeking to think beyond the subject, by seeking to think about the ecstasy of the subject, in reality he only thought of its internal limit, its constitutive antinomy: the sovereignty of the subject, the being above of that which is below. It is certain that Bataille himself realized this difficulty).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Michel Foucault, vol. 8 (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 285. Emphasis mine.

<sup>37</sup> Agamben, "Bataille e il paradosso della sovranità," 117.

For Agamben, Bataille “failed in his failure,” so to speak, to think the impossible thought of that which lies beyond subjectivity in the forms of sovereignty, ecstasy, death, etc. This thinking ultimately produced nothing more than another form of subjectivity one characterized by its “ecstatic” capacity to die. Bataille’s efforts, in the end, achieve Schmittian results. To wit, Agamben thinks Bataille’s critiques of subjectivity and sovereignty ultimately, albeit unintentionally, create a highly problematic political product in their the effort to (un)produce community beyond the “subjective” needs of law and life. This product is the subject defined by its capacity to be killed, i.e., *homo sacer*. This is ecstasy’s “internal limit” (*limite interno*). Agamben’s essay presents more than an unorthodox or resistant reading of Bataille, however, since he obscures the meaning and function of ecstasy in service to his argument concerning exception; Bataille’s ecstasy, simply stated, is *not* equivalent to (Schmittian) exception. The reason for this, as I will explain, is role of *excess*, which differs dramatically between Bataille and Schmitt or, for that matter, between Bataille and Agamben’s account of him.

To be sure, Schmitt’s “state of exception”--like Agamben’s theory of the ban or *homo sacer*--represents a position that “exceeds” the law, but the nature and function this position remains *purely static*. As the German *Ausnahmenszustand* suggests, the state of exception describes less a vague exceptional space than a “standing place,” a unmoving and unmovable posture, one that commonly grounds the juridical limits of the law and *ipso facto* the state of exception. Indeed such a state must “stand firm,” so to speak, lest it compromise the demarcation between the law and exception or, more importantly, the position of the sovereign or *homo sacer vis à vis* the law. As Schmitt states, the sovereign *belongs to* the law through his exception from it; he cannot transgress the law, nor be entirely subject to it, but he is yet nevertheless always *bound* to the law. In *Political Theology*, Schmitt writes that “although the sovereign stands/

stays outside (*steht ausserhalb*) the normally valid legal system, he nevertheless belongs (*gehört*) to it, for it is he who must decide whether the constitution can be suspended in its entirety.”<sup>38</sup> Agamben himself will insist on this stationary posture when he writes that “the sovereign, who can decide on the state of exception, guarantees its *anchorage* (*ancoraggio*) to the juridical order.”<sup>39</sup> This “belonging” or “anchorage,” which is ironically nevertheless found in the “ban,” “state of exception,” or “suspension” of the law is that which Agamben calls “ecstatic belonging,” recalls his (mis)interpretation of Bataille’s ecstasy.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, this is the very same state he attributes to *homo sacer* and bare life. “What is captured in the sovereign ban is a human victim who may be killed but not sacrificed: *homo sacer*.”<sup>41</sup> Describing the same state of “capture,” “belonging,” “anchorage,” “standing,” and “suspension,” sovereignty and the sacred for Agamben essentially represent forms of *static potential* : bare life or *homo sacer* reserve the potential to be killed, just like the sovereign who, inversely, reserves the potential to kill his subjects. Their (bio)power is commonly located in their unmovable position between juridical inclusion and exclusion, not in the *actual realization* of their potential; the sovereign need not declare a state of emergency, nor need *homo sacer* be killed, since their potential to do so will always remain. Such a position, as Agamben (referencing Derrida) notes,

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<sup>38</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology : Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, 7.

<sup>39</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 35.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer : Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 83. Emphasis mine.

marks the “separation of the ‘force of the law’ from the law.”<sup>42</sup> Agamben’s state of exception, characterizing both sovereignty and the sacred, is therefore essentially a form of *unactualized potential*, that which Thomas Aquinas called *potentia passiva*, or “passive power.”<sup>43</sup> Such is the singular result of sovereignty/the sacred for Agamben, and this is also the result he sees reflected in Bataille’s work.

In this way, Agamben is able to explain Alexandre Kojève’s quasi-Hegelian reading of Bataille’s sacred, one which Kojève offered in the early years of the College of Sociology. For Kojève, the sacred (specifically in the form of Bataille’s “*déchaînement des passions*”) represents the exhaustion of the dialectic and the romantic, post-revolutionary end of history in self-sacrifice.<sup>44</sup> In “Bataille and the Paradox of Sovereignty,” Agamben implies that Kojève’s interpretation of passion is not mistaken in its analysis, but rather in its conclusion. Whereas Kojève considers passion to be liberatory, Agamben considers it to be the potential for sovereignty and infinite subjection. Drawing upon the etymological link between passion (*pathos*), suffering (*paskhein*), and passivity (*patire*), Agamben seems to argue that “the power

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<sup>42</sup> ———, *State of Exception*, 38. For Derrida, the “force of the law” is the law’s self-justified and self-founded use of violence without precondition. Due to this “groundless self-grounding,” one might say, the law as such is a violence devoid of moral value or conditions, yet it also is unable to justify its violence in terms of what is its “right” (*droit*). *Droit* is also founded in this violence. Derrida thereby argues that this groundlessness continues to haunt it in its application through three aporias, all of which amount to this: while the institutions of law are put in place to ensure the universal application of justice, in practice such applications are inextricably laden with a particularity that admits of the arbitrary (see Jacques Derrida, *Force de loi: le << fondement mystique de l'autorité >>*, La philosophie en effet [Paris: Galilée, 1994]).

<sup>43</sup> Aquinas (drawing upon Aristotelian metaphysics) explains in his ontological argument for God that He cannot “not be,” and thus expresses his power as pure activity or pure action. God is never the potential or passive object of another force, but instead a being that is in-itself, and thus constitutes its own force pure in the form of action. In contrast, “passive power (*potentia passiva*),” as Agamben writes, “is the principle of being acted on by another (*principium patiendi ab alio*),” and “a thing is passive (*patitur*) to the extent to which it is in potentiality.” In other words, divine action can be independent and cannot be overcome by *potentia passiva*. See chapter XVI of Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975).

<sup>44</sup> In his presentation “Les conceptions hégéliennes,” Kojève writes “le poète qui se réduit à lui-même, s'épuise lui même enfin, et s'anéantit dans son propre néant”; he thus perceives negativity to be exhausted in acts of self-sacrifice like revolution and art. See Bataille and Hollier, *Le Collège de sociologie : 1937-1939*, 70-74.

to be acted upon” rather than “the power to act” becomes the ultimate and politically disastrous meaning of sovereignty/the sacred. When the power of the subject is defined as its potential to be acted upon--*potentia passiva*--“potentially” endless victimization is the result:

Di questi due poli attraverso i quali la filosofia occidentale ha pensato l'essere, il pensiero moderno, da Nietzsche in poi, ha costantemente pensato quello della potenza. Per questo in Bataille--e in quei pensatori, come Blanchot, che gli sono più vicini--decisiva è l'esperienza della passione, di quel *déchaînement des passions* in cui egli scorgeva il senso ultimo del sacro. E che questa passione fosse da intendere nel senso di *potentia passiva*, e ancora una volta Kojève a sottolinearlo, indicando come chiave dell'*expérience intérieure* il passo in cui si dice “l'expérience intérieure est le contraire de l'action”...il pensiero della passione e ancora pensiero dell'essere. Il pensiero contemporaneo, cercando di superare l'essere e il soggetto, abbandona l'esperienza dell'atto, che ha indicato per secoli il vertice della metafisica, ma solo per esasperare e spingere all'estremo la polarità opposta della potenza. In questo modo, però, esso non va al di là del soggetto, ma ne pensa la forma più estrema e stremata: il puro star-sotto, il pathos, la *potentia passiva*, senza riuscire a spezzare il nesso che lo tiene stretto al suo opposto polare.



(Given these two poles through which Western philosophy has thought being, modern thought, from Nietzsche onward, has constantly privileged potential. This is the reason why for Bataille—and those thinkers closest to him, like Blanchot—the experience of this passion, this *déchaînement des passions* is decisive and considered to be the ultimate meaning of the sacred. Kojève emphasized that this passion was to be understood as *potentia passiva*, indicating that the key passage of *L'expérience intérieure* is the one where he states “l'expérience intérieure est le contraire de l'action”.... [T]hought about passion still remains thought about being. In its attempt to surpass being and the subject, contemporary thought has abandoned experience of the act, which for centuries has constituted the highest point of metaphysics, only in order to push and exasperate the opposing pole of potential to the extreme. In this way, however, modern thought does not go beyond the subject but rather thinks of it in the most extreme and exhausted way: that of pure being-below, *pathos* [*patire*], *potentia passiva* without ever breaking the tie that binds it to its opposing pole).<sup>45</sup>

In other words, if sovereignty/the sacred describes a form of power at all, it is one of virtually pure *unactualized potential* (passivity, passion, potential, etc.). If any form of action can be associated with this power, it is found in the form of *being acted upon*, i.e., “pure being-below, *pathos*, *potentia passiva*” that, through its passivity, can never break its “tie that binds it to its opposing pole”: *action*. According to Agamben's formulation, therefore, sovereignty and the sacred describe a form of political power that never truly acts, but can only be acted upon, much like *homo sacer* who is always ready to be killed. Its own activity is *sin qua non* precluded as suspended inactivity, passivity, or potential. It therefore never goes beyond or *exceeds* itself in the form of action; all action is always already recaptured within the sphere of “passion.” Such a power remains within a restricted economy, excluding itself from action: it simply “remains,” so to speak, in a state of exception. By neutralizing and foreclosing actuality within the sphere of potentiality, by “remaining in its state,” sovereignty and

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<sup>45</sup> Agamben, “Bataille e il paradosso della sovranità,” 118.

the sacred for Agamben always ultimately assume the static, unactualized potential discussed above. In the final analysis, therefore, it might be more accurate to say that these categories do not merely describe forms of unactualized potential in Agamben, but rather forms of *unactualizable potential*. This might be the most concise and accurate description of the state of exception, characterized as a static form of “belonging,” “anchorage,” “standing,” “suspension,” etc. In conclusion, sovereignty and the sacred for Agamben do not evoke a potential for action, but rather a potential that never becomes actualized, in brief, an economy of “impotence.”<sup>46</sup>

In essence, this marks the difference between exception and excess, and thus Agamben’s departure from--and misrepresentation of--Bataille’s thinking on sovereignty and the sacred. In Bataille, the nature and function of excess--whether in the form of ecstasy, sovereignty, the sacred, etc.--is markedly different. Whereas exception denotes a form of power as static, unactualizable potential, excess describes instead a potential *always ready to be actualized*. In other words, while Agamben’s exception describes “the potential not to do” exemplified by his Bartleby, Bataille’s excess describes *actualizable unactualized potential*, or what one might describe as the infinite potential “to do undoing” or, equally, “to undo doing.”<sup>47</sup> The potential to do undoing (or undo doing) is, for Bataille, ultimately the meaning of all action, insofar as he considers action itself to be the doing of death, the ultimate “undoing.”

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<sup>46</sup> In his analysis of “constituting power” and “constituted power” in the section “Potentiality and the Law” of *Homo Sacer*, Agamben claims them to be analogous to *dynamis* and *energeia* in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. He argues not only that *energeia* (action) can never exhaust *dynamis* (potential), but that the proper understanding of potential requires suspension, its “potential not to be”: “This potentiality maintains itself in relation to actuality in the form of its suspension; it is capable of the act in not realizing it, it is sovereignly capable of its own impotentiality (*impotenza*)” (———, *Homo Sacer : Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 45). Later, he clarifies that “potentiality...is that through which Being founds itself sovereignly, which is to say, without anything preceding or determining it...other than its own ability not to be,” making potentiality thus “first and foremost the potential not to” (Ibid., 46).

<sup>47</sup> Indeed, these might be understood as alternate formulations of what Nancy has called *désœuvrement*, which I consider to be an accurate and useful concept for understanding Bataille’s thought. For more on Agamben’s account of Bartleby and potentiality, see “Bartleby, or On Contingency” in Giorgio Agamben and Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Potentialities : Collected Essays in Philosophy*, Meridian: crossing aesthetics (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999).

Bataille's conception of work is an excellent example of this; even though work is a form of action that seeks to prolong survival or avoid death, it is nevertheless the fear of death that ultimately motivates Bataille's worker. As a result, even the most actively industrious attempts to survive bespeak the presence of death and undoing. Such is essentially the meaning of what Bataille's biographer Michel Surya referred to as "la mort à l'oeuvre," a phrase that concisely captures Bataille's ironic formulation in his prose-poem "Le jeu" for example: "Qui travaille, de ce fait, sent la mort approcher...l'indigent qui ne travaille pas ne mange pas et, faute de manger, se promet à la mort."<sup>48</sup> As a form of *excess*, death does not simply describe that which surpasses working life as a suspended possibility; it also *enacts* this possibility in the very form of work. For Bataille, death is always "at work," so to speak, even *in life*, even though this work, in the end, achieves death too and thus nothing--but this nothing is also a potential readiness for *everything*.

Bataille is most explicit about the relationship between action and potential in his responses to Hegel. In his noted 1937 letter to Alexander Kojève, "Lettre à X, chargé d'un cours sur Hegel," for example, Bataille insists upon the inexhaustible potential of negativity (i.e., death) latent in Hegel's thought, it's "négativité sans emploi," even despite Hegel's insistence that the dialectic exhausts all negativity.<sup>49</sup> He would later develop this position in *L'expérience intérieure* and most famously in "Hegel, la mort et le sacrifice." Departing from Kojève's assertions that Hegel's dialectic is "en dernière analyse une philosophie de la mort," a philosophy that elaborates death through dialectical negation, Bataille argues that actions accomplished through these processes also implicates the undoing of these actions. In his letter to Kojève, for example, he writes

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<sup>48</sup> Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 12, 547.

<sup>49</sup> Bataille and Hollier, *Le Collège de sociologie : 1937-1939*, 75-82.

le fait--qui ne parait pas contestable--qu'une négativité se détournant de l'action s'exprime en oeuvre d'art n'en est pas moins chargé de sens quant aux possibilités subsistant pour moi. Il indique que la négativité peut être objectivée...Mais ni dans l'oeuvre d'art, ni dans les éléments émotionnels de la religion, la négativité n'est "reconnue en tant que telle," au moment ou elle entre dans le jeu de l'existence...Tout au contraire, elle est introduite dans un processus d'annulation.<sup>50</sup>

In other words, the negativity of death can be "objectified" (*négativité peut être objectivé*), realized as a positive form of action, like creating a work of art for example. Once objectified, however, once it enters "the game of existence" (*le jeu de l'existence*), it never realizes negativity as such (*en tant que telle*) but rather only a distilled instance, a single possibility, one among others (*possibilités subsistant pour moi*). Thus negativity is *enacted*, but never entirely *exhausted* in its potential. Indeed, this potential is further enacted in the form of its annulment (*annulation*), i.e., the *undoing* of the former action done. Thus, when Bataille writes that, for Hegel, "l'Action est Négativité, et la Négativité, Action," he seeks to emphasize *not* that which action *does* with negativity (*à la* Hegel and Kojève), but rather *the doing and undoing* that *is* the inexhaustible action of negativity.<sup>51</sup> In a word, this is the action of excess, that which goes beyond doing and undoing alike.

As a result, action is not the simply the opposite of the potential associated with negativity and death; it is also the realization of this potential--however limited--in the forms of doing *and* undoing. Action is less a category than a circular process, one that continually traverses the limit between life and death, existence and non-existence, law and anomie, due to the insistence of excess. Yet this circle never achieves complete closure for Bataille; action is never exhausted (*il ne s'épuise pas*). In the

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 77-78.

<sup>51</sup> Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 12, 327.

section on Hegel in *L'Expérience intérieure* (1951), Bataille makes this circularity explicit:

L'action introduit le connu (le fabriqué), puis l'entendement qui lui est lié rapporte, l'un après l'autre, les éléments non-fabriqués, inconnus, au connu. Mais le désir, la poésie, le rire, font incessamment glisser la vie dans le sens contraire, allant du connu à l'inconnu. L'existence à la fin décèle la tache aveugle de l'entendement et s'y absorbe aussitôt tout entière. Il ne pourrait en aller autrement que si une possibilité de repos s'offrait en un point quelconque. Mais il n'en est rien: ce qui seul demeure est l'agitation circulaire--qui ne s'épuise pas dans l'extase et recommence à partir d'elle.<sup>52</sup>

In this passage, Bataille echoes the response he made to Kojève some years earlier, insisting on the inexhaustible nature of negativity and death even in the form of action. That which is known (*connu*) or produced (*fabriqué*) is always tethered to the unknown (*inconnu*) and unproduced (*non-fabriqués*) because of the slippage (*glissement*) induced by the circular agitation (*l'agitation circulaire*) of existence. This would not be the case were it not for the inexhaustible potential of existence (*qui ne s'épuise pas*), whose inherent and constant excess propels action forward. Ecstasy (*extase*) is also the expression of this incessant action, contrary to Agamben's interpretation. As a form of circular movement between doing and undoing, being and non-being, life and death, excess therefore represents a form of infinite potential *ready to be actualized*, not a form of *unactualizable potential*. In essence, one might say that excess describes a constant state of *performativity*, whereas exception denotes the *unperformable*. Thus action for Bataille not only marks the eternal return of negativity, but also a negativity that *escapes* this circle, and thus also *undoes* it.

To the degree that "ambivalence" does obscure the conceptual nuance belonging

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<sup>52</sup> Bataille, *L'expérience intérieure*, 129-30. The "circular agitation" that remains (*demeure*) because of the excessive nature of death strongly echoes Derrida's analysis of *demeurer* and survival in the writings of Blanchot. See Jacques Derrida, *Demeure : Maurice Blanchot*, Incises (Paris: Galilée, 1998).

to it, I agree with Agamben when he says that “an assumed ambivalence of the generic religious category of the sacred, cannot explain the juridico-political phenomenon” to which it refers. To investigate the precise nature of this phenomenon, however, it is necessary to conduct a close examination of the sacred as it is represented and deployed within the specific context of the College of Sociology and the *Ecole sociologique*, giving special attention to the period’s most influential theorist of the sacred : Georges Bataille. Such an examination will respond to Agamben’s misrepresentation, provide historical nuance to the sacred as a concept of excess particular to 20th century French thought, and illustrate this concept’s function specifically within the work of those authors surrounding Bataille and the College of Sociology. Moreover, I would argue that this conception of the sacred provides not only an alternative to Agamben’s formulation, but indeed a response to its polemical teleology and fatalism.

***The Unworking of Excess.*** Due to the essentially sacred character of existence, and due to the essentially excessive character of the sacred, all life according to the logic of sacred excess is ultimately always already also on the horizon of death, making even those actions that try to keep death at bay a “potential” form of death in action. As I have shown above, this is the case in Bataille’s understanding of work. By the same logic, however, the sacrificial pursuit of death in intoxication, eroticism, and art--those activities valorized by Bataille and his peers--also achieves the vital reaffirmation of life that, as such, ultimately itself transcends the result of this pursuit. Indeed, they will commonly talk about the sacred and sacrifice as a form of rebirth or *raison d'être*. In his review of Gabriel Marcel’s *La parole est aux saints*, for example, Bataille writes “c’est dans l’instant même où la mort a lieu, non dans un calcul impliquant les résultats à venir, qu’il faut trouver la raison d’être de l’attitude de

martyr.”<sup>53</sup> Echoing Bataille, Laure writes “Tout ce qui relève de la raison d’être est sacré pour moi, raison d’être encore, raison de vie, de mort.”<sup>54</sup> Given the apparent equivalence of life and death, sacrifice and rebirth in sacred excess, the four following assertions become equivalent: the sacred is life beyond death, life beyond life, death beyond life, and death beyond death.

Such is the problematic ethical consequence of sacred excess. It precludes the defense of life or privileging of life over death, since death represents culmination of life as it is negated (and vice versa), forming a logic whereby violence reigns supreme and renders inconsequential, if not “in-valuable,” the difference between life and death, how they come about, or who/what is responsible for them.<sup>55</sup> The sacred is manifest the violence that instantiates the the law, just as it is manifest in the violence that transgresses it, whether this transgression take place for reasons of revolutionary justice or tyrannical oppression. This why Leiris, like Bataille, will say for example that the sacred represents the juncture of Left and Right political forces. “L’idée du sacré” represents “ce point fulgurant où le droit coïncide avec le gauche” writes Leiris in *Miroir de la tauromachie*. Whatever their cause, life and death--like the Left and

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<sup>53</sup> Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 11, 121.

<sup>54</sup> Laure and Peignot, *Ecrits de Laure*, 86.

<sup>55</sup> Arguments of this sort have become more prevalent in Bataille criticism, especially with regard to Bataille’s equivocal response to the Holocaust. In his essay “L’Insacriable,” for example, Jean-Luc Nancy will illustrate show how Bataille brief writings on the Holocaust broach a highly problematic sacrificial conception in *Une pensée finie* (Paris: Galilée, 1990). Taking a cue from Nancy, Paul Hegarty further explores Bataille’s sacrificial thinking on the the Holocaust in Paul Hegarty, “Bataille, Agamben, and the Holocaust,” *Other Voices: A Journal of Critical Thought* 2, no. 2 (2002): 94-99. Dominick LaCapra advances a similar critique of Bataille’s violence in *History and its Limits : Human, Animal, Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), where he takes particular exception to Bataille’s unnuanced vision of the sacrificial victim, which “stresses the role of voluntary victims” and not unwilling “scapegoated outsiders,” if not uncritically (if not unethically) conflating the two though “projective identification with the victim” (See *Ibid.*, 100-110).

Right--represent two modes of the same violent, vicious circle of sacred excess.<sup>56</sup> It is in this specific regard that Agamben's polemical analysis of the sacred merits serious attention, since its results concerning the value of life for *homo sacer* are proximate to the logic of the sacred mentioned here. While not a life "with the infinite capacity to be killed" without juridical consequence in this case, sacred life, as an excessive concept, does risk the potential for its own "in-valuation" as an *absolute form of value* beyond all particular values--even life itself--and thus beyond all normative limits that

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<sup>56</sup> Leiris, *Miroir de la tauromachie*, 57. In this way, the conception of the sacred particular to the authors under consideration implies an inextricable relationship between violence and law. Unlike Paul Hegarty has suggested, for example, Bataille does *not* present a conception of "divine violence" as suggested in Walter Benjamin's essay "The Critique of Violence" (*Kritik der Gewalt*) whereby violence (like the proletarian general strike, for example) can be mystically divorced both from law and bloodshed. (See Paul Hegarty, "Undelivered: the Space/Time of the Sacred in Bataille and Benjamin," *Economy and Society* 32, no. 1 (2003). Rather, Leiris, Bataille, and Caillois will commonly insist, drawing upon the conception of sacred ambiguity, that the sacred always inscribes a juridical limit at which converges revolution and oppression, *nomos* and *anomie*, etc. By insisting on the retracing and transgression of the juridical limit through violence, this conception of the sacred comes closer to Derrida's "messianicity without messianism," in which the originary groundlessness of juridical violence, of force, of *droit* continues to haunt its application in his *Force de la loi*. Still, by anchoring his analysis of law in the concept of justice always "on the way" (*à venir*), Derrida offers a more optimistic vision of the failure of juridical violence (*force, droit*) than Bataille or the other authors considered here, who I would argue cannot dissociate the transgressive quality of justice--what they might call the "Left sacred"--from the egregious violence of oppression (the "Right sacred"). This does make the "politics of the sacred" potentially problematic; Zeev Sternhell has argued that such a synthesis of political poles, combined with anti-rationalist affectivity, characterizes the fascism of the 1930s in Zeev Sternhell, *Ni droite, ni gauche : l'idéologie fasciste en France*, 3 ed., *Historiques* 35 (Bruxelles: Editions complexe, 2000).



would responsibly seek to defend such values.<sup>57</sup> As *absolute values*, life and death have no value in particular, except in their ability to remain absolute through exceeding, transgressing life in death, death in life: to do undoing, to undo doing.

Being greater than the sum of any part, having a meaning beyond all meaning, a value beyond all values, the sacredness of life or death can ultimately only be realized there where it ceases to have particular value or specific meaning--i.e., there where the sacred itself can only be achieved in its failure. Such is perhaps the ultimate consequence of the sacred's excessive, absolute logic: sacralization must achieve *its own undoing*--its own desacralization, its own "profanation," as it were, as the case of Bataillan work suggests. Thus does the notion of the sacred sacrifice itself; it implies "the sacrifice of sacrifice." This too results from its aporetic excess. It is this more self-defeating quality of sacred excess--a quality that results from its own logic--that Bataille, Laure, Leiris did not consider in their pursuit for the resacralization of life through means of a radical negativity or expenditure without end. Insofar as this excess continually transgresses the line between life and death, it is also *recuperated as a resource* for the *actualization* of life and death themselves in a vicious and violent circle of absolution. Just as sacred excess undoes the subject in death, so does it give it

<sup>57</sup> This is, in essence, philosopher Jan Patocka's claim in "La civilisation technique est-elle une civilisation de déclin, et pourquoi?" in Jan Patocka, *Essais herétiques sur la philosophie de l'histoire*, trans. Erika Abrams (Paris: Verdier, 1981), 105-27. For Patocka, the world of the sacred, presumed to be a form of liberation from the profane world of things, is not "true liberty" since it is a form of escapism, untethered to the responsibilities of everyday life. Thus is it what he calls the "orgiastic" or "demonic" sacred, to which he opposes the Christian mystery, a more responsible and ethical formulation of sacred life. Citing Durkheim, Patocka writes "du point de vue du dépassement du sacré orgiaque, il est vu alors justement comme démoniaque," but "le démoniaque doit être mis en rapport avec la responsabilité; à l'origine, ce rapport n'existe pas" (Ibid., 110). Derrida, in his analysis of Patocka in the opening pages of *Donner la mort*, exposes the problems with this opposition by focusing on the ambiguity inherent in the notion of the sacred. Derrida exposes this ambiguity within Patocka's argument by showing how the demonic sacred and Christian mystery are not mutually exclusive; Christian mystery indeed incorporates the orgiastic, and thus its presumed responsibility also incorporates the "demonic" quality of irresponsibility and violence. He goes on to argue that Christianity, especially in the case of the crucifixion, inaugurates a new sense of individual responsibility based on a recognition of shared human guilt for sacrificial violence. Thus for Derrida does sacred violence both disrupt and foster an ethical link to alterity. Bataille, Laure, and Leiris's evocation of the sacred would likely more side with Derrida's account in *Donner la mort*, though Patocka's position is not without its merits as a political and ethical critique of the sacred. (See Jacques Derrida, *Donner la mort* [Paris: Galilée, 1999], 1-55).

life: it becomes both a purpose and resource, a means and end. Thus does sacred excess exceed itself, express itself, in a ceaselessly *useful* and *productive* form as well, however transient, creating different lives subject to this excess, different “sacrificial subjects.” In contrast to *homo sacer* which may be killed but not sacrificed, valued as a resource for only for its juridico-political capacity to die, the sacrificial subject is valued “absolutely” both *in and beyond* (both) life and death as a resource for their common expression. Thus does the sacred manifest itself, at least partially, in the form of *use* or *action*. If the world of work and utility represent the profanation of life for Bataille and other members of the College, it nevertheless remains an unavoidable residue in the pursuit of the sacred. The attempt to realize in sacrifice the unactualized potential of the subject’s inner-negativity and death nevertheless repeated actualizes this unactualized potential in the form of the *self-sacrificial subject*. This would seem akin to what Agamben has in mind when he says that Bataille, “by seeking to think beyond the subject, by seeking to think about the ecstasy of the subject, in reality...only thought of its internal limit, its constitutive antinomy.”

Marcel Mauss’ famed analysis of sacrifice already anticipates the reappropriative and utilitarian mechanism described above. With the exception of the sacrifice of the god--the only victim who “se sacrifie [et] se donne sans retour”<sup>58</sup>--that which is given in sacrifice, the life of the taboo scapegoat, is also *given back* to the executioner and the tribe according to Mauss. The survival of the tribe represents the salubrious dialectical resolution of life over death. Life is returned to the executioner and his kin through consuming the sacrificial offering or substitutively diverting death toward the scapegoat. To do this, however, the executioner, through the power

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<sup>58</sup> Mauss and Karady, *Oeuvres*, vol. I: *Les fonctions sociales du sacré*, 304. Despite Bataille’s valorization of god’s endless self-sacrifice, Mauss himself insists that, except for the sacrifice of the god, it is “l’acte d’abnégation”--not that of expenditure--“qui est implique dans tout sacrifice, en rappelant fréquemment aux consciences particulières la présence des forces collectives, entretient précisément leur existence idéale” (Ibid., 306; see following note).

afforded to him by the tribe or rite, must perform a kind of magical legerdemain wherein he transposes the life of the tribe onto the scapegoat only to withdraw and preserve that very life again for the tribe. This may be done, for example, through sharing the sacrificial offering with the tribe or by diverting potential violence away from it. The executioner therefore both surrenders and denies his life (and that of the tribe) at the same time; “dans tout sacrifice,” Mauss writes, “il y a un acte d’abnégation, puisque le sacrifiant se prive et donne... Si le sacrifiant donne quelque chose de soi, il ne se donne pas; il se réserve prudemment. C’est que, s’il donne, c’est en partie pour recevoir.” The gift the executioner gives in expiation--life--is also taken back as purification. Mauss claims, therefore, that the practice of sacrifice is predicated on the idea of *rachat*—“buyback,” or perhaps more precisely in English, “redemption.” “Il n’y a pas de sacrifice,” he writes, “où n’intervienne quelque idée de rachat.”<sup>59</sup> Life is reappropriated--redeemed or “bought back”--at the expense of life itself in death--its expropriation. The life so (re)appropriated transformatively sublates into the enduring life of the executioner, tribe, and God at the same time. That which the tribe does to attain this sublation Mauss calls the group’s “personnalité sociale,” but one might more simply call it the tribe’s *personal identity*.

In her study of hospitality, Tracy McNulty compellingly posits this impossible exchange within the identity of the host, whose prestige is “bought back,” one might say, at the cost of his own hospitable self-sacrifice. Her analysis shows the host to be quintessential figure of self-sacrifice: to divest himself of his property, his “house,” denies him what makes him host; on the other hand, this dispossession makes him the

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 306. Drawing upon Mauss’ analysis of the sacrifice of the god, Bataille writes in *Théorie de la religion* that “le sacrifice est l’antithèse de la production.” For Bataille, sacrifice, unlike traditional potlatch and gift-exchange, constitutes a form of radical expropriation without return. “C’est en ce sens qu’il est don et abandon, mais ce qui est donné ne peut être un objet de conservation pour le donataire” (Georges Bataille, *Théorie de la religion* [Paris: Gallimard, 1974], 66). Bataille does make great use of Mauss’ conclusion that the most expropriatory form of all sacrifice consists in sacrifice of the god(s), however, with which he associates the Nietzschean death of God and Dionysian intoxication.

hospitable host *par excellence*. Hospitality thus presents “a double bind,” she writes, “since the host must both take in the stranger and respect its foreignness...welcome the stranger there where he is at home and risk homelessness or dispossession at his hands.”<sup>60</sup> The identity of the host, she argues, cannot therefore be achieved through opposition or antagonism with a foreign (and frequently feminine) otherness, as the host’s identity precisely depends upon openness to what is foreign. Rather, the host--to be a “host”--must somehow re-appropriate his own hospitable sacrifices to others while maintaining their “otherness” within himself. Thus does hospitality trace “an aporetic limit where identity is established at the very moment of its dissolution, through contact with the nonidentical, the other.”<sup>61</sup>

As McNulty’s analysis suggests, hospitality illustrates the mobile divide between identity and difference in acts of self-sacrifice. Self-sacrifice animates this divide because it is forever completed through incompleteness. The identity, whether personal or communal, that sacrifice fosters must be maintained through the mechanism of sacrifice itself, without which such life cannot endure, nor the gods survive. Sacrifice thus “s’étend à la vie future,” Mauss writes, through its own repetition and mimesis. In his analysis of divine sacrifice, he explains:

c’est par le semblable qu’on nourrit le semblable et la victime est la nourriture des dieux. Aussi le sacrifice a-t-il été rapidement considéré comme la condition même de l’existence divine...Ainsi, non seulement c’est dans le sacrifice que quelques dieux prennent naissance, mais encore c’est par le sacrifice que tous entretiennent leur existence.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Tracy McNulty, *The Hostess : Hospitality, Femininity, and the Expropriation of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xv.

<sup>61</sup> ———, “Hospitality after the Death of God,” *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism* 35, no. 1 (2005): 72.

<sup>62</sup> Mauss and Karady, *Oeuvres, vol. I: Les fonctions sociales du sacré*, 298.

Sacrifice must be repeated for the gods--and thus for the tribe and its identity--as the very *conditio sin qua non* of their existence. As Mauss suggests, however, their survival depends on the *mimetic* relation (*semblable*) between victim and the gods whereby the two become two sides of the same coin. In other words, sacrifice requires the simultaneous *opposition and equivalence* of the life lost in sacrifice (-x) with the “immortalized” life restored to the gods, the tribe, their identity (+x). Both equal and opposite, the life restored is “commensurately incommensurable” with the life lost, insofar as both are of the same *absolute value* (/x/). Rendered “absolutely invaluable” through the sacred, both life and death preclude the possibility avoiding the vicious circle of violence which, through death, both creates and redeems life. “Les retours offensifs du chaos et du mal requièrent sans cesse de nouveaux sacrifices, créateurs et rédempteurs” writes Mauss.<sup>63</sup>

As equal and opposite, the attempt to immunize life *against* violence and death *through* sacrifice also, in the end, results in violence and death *from* immunity *in* sacrifice; in other words, the sacrifice to avert violence is, in the end, *itself* somehow sacrificed through this violence. In essence, this phenomenon makes sacrifice at once self-destructive and self-creative, both prodigal and useful as a simultaneous affirmation and destruction of life, recalling once again the character of sacred ambivalence. Drawing upon Benveniste’s conception of the sacred (above), Jacques Derrida in *Foi et savoir* (1996) considers this precise aporetic logic that ties together these two dimensions of sacrifice--the conservative and creative, the excessive and destructive. The latter he calls “autosacrifice” (*l’autosacrifice*), or the “sacrifice of sacrifice,” whereas the latter he will call autoimmunity (*l’autoimmunité*), referring to the process whereby the body’s immune system actually destroys the body. In an interview published in *Philosophy in A Time of Terror*, Derrida summarizes that an

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<sup>63</sup> Mauss and Karady, *Oeuvres*, vol. I: *Les fonctions sociales du sacré*, 300.

autoimmune condition is one where “a living being, in a quasi-suicidal fashion, ‘itself’ works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself against its ‘own’ immunity.” Autoimmunitary actions “produce, invent and feed the very monstrosity they claim to overcome.”<sup>64</sup> An autoimmune condition both animates and threatens itself in a “quasi-suicidal” fashion insofar as the “excessive” defense of life necessarily culminates in death. Indeed, given that sacrifice is typically a form of death used to avert more egregious life-threatening circumstances, it principally serves an immunizing function. And, to the extent that life and death, conceived to be excessive, absolute values, autoimmunity and autosacrifice may likewise be conceived as alternative appellations for the same repetitive, machinelike, absolute process.

In *Foi et savoir*, Derrida posits the mechanism of self-sacrifice within the inviolable dignity often associated to life, i.e. its sacredness. The dignity of life--a concept Derrida borrows from Kant’s analysis of teleological judgement--is based on the logic of absolute value whereby the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Absolute value is essentially a concept of (sublime) excess:

Cette dignité de la vie ne peut se tenir qu’au-delà du vivant présent. D’où transcendance, fétichisme et spectralité, d’où religiosité de la religion. Cet excès sur le vivant, dont la vie ne vaut absolument qu’a valoir plus que la vie, plus qu’elle même, en somme, voilà ce qui ouvre l’espace mort qu’on lie à l’automate...la technique, la machine, la prothèse, la virtualité, bref les dimensions de la supplémentarité auto-immunitaire et autosacrificielle, cette pulsion de mort qui travaille en silence toute communauté...et en vérité la constitue comme telle, dans son iterabilité, son héritage, sa tradition spectrale.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Derrida, and Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror : Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 94-99. Author’s emphasis.

<sup>65</sup> Derrida, *Foi et Savoir, suivi de Le Siecle et le Pardon*, 79.

In other words, the sacred dignity of life (*dignité de la vie*), conceived as an end in itself, offers no form of exchange value. As such, the opposition of life and death is no longer appropriate, since both conditions are equally representative of the same excessive, *absolute* value. It has a value beyond everything else (*plus que*), even beyond itself (*plus qu'elle même*) in death (*l'espace mort*), so the growth or diminution of life is, in Derridean parlance, always already recaptured within the same economy, presenting thereby a form of excess inherent to life (*excès sur le vivant*) in the form of an *absolute value*, one ultimately independent of its negative (death) or positive (life) representation. In other words, the sacredness of life, its inherent dignity, is ultimately found *(n)either in life (n)or in death*. As Derrida's analysis implies, therefore, there are (at least) two forms of "life": the first signifies normative meanings of birth, growth, or vital effulgence; the second signifies an absolute economy of excess--what Bataille might call a "general economy"--wherein life has an absolute value unopposed to death, its inverse but *equal* expression. According to the same logic, Derrida implies likewise (at least) two forms of death. That which transforms one form into the other is the "supplementary" machine (*la technique, la machine*, etc.) that reproduces itself through autoimmunity (*autoimmunitaire*)--the effulgence of life that causes death--and/or its complement, autosacrifice (*autosacrificielle*)--the death that causes the renaissance of life. Thus does the immunization against immunity achieve the same result as the sacrifice of sacrifice; Derrida writes that "l'auto-immunisation et le sacrifice du sacrifice" commonly result from "le respect absolu" of life, its excessive, sacred character, for which the quintessential expression is self-sacrifice: "le sacrifice du soi, du plus précieux intérêt."<sup>66</sup> In other words, by sacrificing itself to itself in order to be "itself," the excessive quality of the sacred becomes *sublated* through the constant (*re-*)

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 80.

*appropriation of its own excessive self-expropriation.* In this way, the sacred does not only refer to the self-sacrificial gift of one's "own" existence, identity, or interests, but the very sacrifice of this sacrifice in and through its iterated (*iterabilité*) reappropriation *qua* sacrifice. The "excess" implied in sacrifice, that is, does not *entirely* exceed some form of residual reserve, provisional closure, or tentative conservation that gives "a greater life" to the subject through self-sacrifice and death. Such makes holy the ascetics, saints, and martyrs, who serve not only to bind the faithful together religiously or communally but also to *unify* and *distinguish* the faith as its exemplars, as its guarantors of collective *identity*.

***The Work of Conservation.*** Appropriately, the question of reappropriation and conservation through the supposedly expropriate work of excess has become a controversial issue in Bataille studies, as Agamben's essay already suggests. To what degree can expropriation, excess, and death be articulated, represented, without some necessary recourse to their opposite(s)?<sup>67</sup> Jean Luc Nancy will make much of the reappropriative mechanism of sacrifice in his essay "L'insacrifiable," wherein he argues that the sacrifice of sacrifice--the sacrificial negation (rebirth) of negation (death)--is the ultimate "truth" of sacrifice in the West, one that Bataille in particular, despite his efforts, does not escape. In his brief genealogy of the concept, Nancy claims that four characteristics are essential to the ontotheology of sacrifice in Christianity and Platonism. The first of these is that all sacrifice is self-sacrifice. He uses as examples the sacrifices of Socrates and Christ who he explains realize their identity through their own self-destruction. For both Socrates and Christ "l'événement

<sup>67</sup> In her book *The Self and its Pleasures*, Carolyn Dean argues that Bataille actually advances a sadism, one that recuperates the heterogeneous and excessive in sexual action. Likewise, in her essay "Bataille on the Street," Susan Suleiman likewise questions the self-expropriation implied by eroticism. "The hero of inner-experience," she writes, "actively engages himself in '*la déchirure*.' He is dominant and virile." Masculinity is therefore restituted and protected through the presence of the masculine subject telling the story. See Carolyn J. Dean, *The Self and its Pleasures : Bataille, Lacan, and the History of the Decentered Subject* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), 26 and Susan Rubin Suleiman, "Bataille in the Street: The Search for Virility in the 1930s," in *Bataille: Writing the Sacred*, ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill (Routledge, London, 1995), 76.



du sacrifice proprement dit...la mise-à-mort, vient seulement ponctuer et exposer le procès et la vérité d'une vie qui est de part en part elle-même le sacrifice."<sup>68</sup> In other words, Socrates and Christ can only properly become who they are through their own sacrificial demise. Citing Saint Augustine and Saint Paul, he explains that second constitutes the "uniqueness" of this sacrifice, by which he means that "il est consommé pour tous, ou plus précisément encore, tous y sont rassemblés, offerts, consacrés."<sup>69</sup> In other words, the singular act of sacrifice dialectically resolves the one with the many in the form of a communal substance (much like the *corpus christi mysticum*, for example). Thirdly, this sacrifice is inseparable from the "truth" of all sacrifices, by which he means the elevation of a single sacrifice into a general essence of sacrifice, one able to unify all sacrificial acts and thus make them all part of the same eternal and communal fusion. This characteristic is found in rites of forbearance or fasting, for example, which operate to unify the religious community around an analogous, if not identical sacrifice made by God or His representatives. The fourth and final is "the truth of the sacrifice"--a decidedly Hegelian notion--which sublates (*relève*) "le moment sacrificiel du sacrifice lui-même" or the "sacrifice of sacrifice," the reappropriation of sacrifice to itself as the essence *sine qua non* of expropriation. These combined characteristics attest to its transcendence and infinity, which must nevertheless "résorbe en lui le moment fini du sacrifice lui-même, et donc en ce qu'il doit, logiquement, pour accéder à sa vérité se sacrifier en tant que sacrifice."<sup>70</sup> In other words, an individual sacrifice must paradoxically recapture its infinite essence and universality as its own "finite" truth. Citing Hegel, he explains therefore that sacrifice

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<sup>68</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, "L'Insacrifiable," in *Une pensée finie* (Paris: Galilée, 1990), 74.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 77.

will be sacrifice only in the “figurative sense” (*un sens figuré*), because it is truly “la réconciliation avec soi-même de l’essence absolu.”<sup>71</sup>

The reason for this final characteristic is what he revealingly terms the “transappropriation” (*trans-appropriation*) of sacrifice, by which Nancy means an act of reappropriation that 1) *transgresses* the limits of law and life, giving them up to the infinite negativity of death, and 2) *appropriates* this infinity through a resumptive nominalism back into a particular, *finite* essence, such as the tribe, Christ, or personal identity. In other words, “on pourrait dire: c’est en s’appropriant la mort que le sacrifice se dérobe à la vérité du moment de désappropriation”<sup>72</sup>; “‘sacrifice’ veut dire: appropriation du Soi dans sa propre négativité.”<sup>73</sup> The gift of sacrifice is to give “itself” away, but sacrifice always somehow “gets itself back” *qua* “giving itself away,” thus sublating the appropriation and expropriation of the sacrificial gift, sacrificing its own sacrifice. Indeed, Nancy’s analysis of sacrifice recalls Bataille’s analysis of potlatch and the gift in *La part maudite*, wherein he explains that gift-exchange is not true sacrificial expenditure because prestige is conferred upon the one who gives. In gift-exchange, something is *given back*; hence Bataille’s insistence that sacrifice represents the only true form of absolute expenditure. Nancy’s critique of Bataille likewise faintly echoes Derrida’s argument in *Donner le temps*, wherein he claims that the gift, including a sacrificial gift to the gods, cannot retroactively identify the giver without putting the gift itself into an economy of exchange and return.<sup>74</sup> Nancy claims that, despite Bataille’s overtures to expenditure and radical expropriation, he too cannot and does not escape the sublative transappropriation of

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>74</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Donner le temps*, Collection La Philosophie en effet (Paris: Galilée, 1991).

sacrifice. Referring to Bataille's essay "L'art, exercice de cruauté,"<sup>75</sup> Nancy shows how the Bataillan search for self-sacrificial abandon and death ultimately accomplishes only its simulacrum or mimesis--which is also its sublation--especially in the form of art.

As Bataille himself writes in his letter to Kojève (above), the work of art represents the "objectification of negativity," but one that ultimately betrays the negativity from which it derives and to which it eventually returns. Nancy departs from Bataille's thought by emphasizing that such negativity, even in Bataille's own oeuvre, cannot be realized without the substantiation of such "a work"; indeed there may be no greater evidence for this than the very existence of Bataille's *Oeuvres complètes*. Conceived and practiced as a form of transgression that places the artist "à la hauteur du pire" and "en révèle l'ouverture à tout le possible," the work of art for Bataille lets one commune "avec la jouissance d'une *appropriation* instantanée de la mort."<sup>76</sup> This appropriation, despite Bataille's insistence on the prodigal expenditure of sacrifice, illustrates the inherent self-envelopment of negativity and death within the sacrificial act, which thus precludes (for Nancy) the possibility of an elusive "excess" negativity. As a result, sacrifice represents "l'institution même de l'économie absolue de la subjectivité absolue, qui en effet ne peut que mimer le passage par la négativité, d'où elle ne peut symétriquement, que se réapproprier ou se trans-approprier infiniment."<sup>77</sup> With the *a priori* and complete reappropriation of a negativity within sacrifice, the subject and identity are reborn--reborn *as* negativity--like Christ, in fulfillment of the nascent condition of sacrifice for such identity. For Nancy, this places Bataille's thinking within the ontotheological tradition of sacrifice.

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<sup>75</sup> Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 11, 480-86.

<sup>76</sup> Nancy, "L'Insacrifiable," 90. Emphasis mine.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 83-4. See Chapter Two for an extended analysis of Bataille's theory of sacrifice.

***Selfish Self-Sacrifice.*** As a form of re-appropriation that mediates between the sign of death and death itself, the finite and the infinite, between “simulacrum and nothingness” (*le simulacre et le néant*), Nancy explains that Bataillan sacrifice constitutes of mimesis that “supplements, relays, or sublates” (*suppléer, relayer ou relever*) in finite fashion the infinite “impasse of sacrifice” (*l’impasse du sacrifice*), and thereby completely reappropriates the self-expropriation of sacrifice.<sup>78</sup> Insofar as all forms of sacrifice accomplish this, Nancy is able to insist on the ontological unity of all sacrifices as a common “sacrifice of sacrifice.” The attempt to identify a sacrificial act, therefore, requires a sublation of its infinite expropriative and appropriative movements into finite and complete expression. Sacrifice is “identified” somehow as that which “dis-identifies” from itself, something that is always and forever what it is *not*. The sacrifice of sacrifice produces the impossible “identification” of identity and non-identity in its reappropriation of death and the radical alterity it represents--such is the sublation of sacrifice. The Hegelian architecture that undergirds Nancy’s conception of sacrifice permits him to compare art with the reconstituted subject in Bataille. “Une représentation dominante de l’art,” he asks, “n’est-elle pas celle de l’exposition transgressive d’un sujet, qui par la s’approprie et se laisse approprier?”<sup>79</sup> For Nancy, the negativity of sacrifice, even in Bataille, is reconstituted and reappropriated as a positive, finite manifestation of its truth *qua* negativity (death), especially in the form of mimesis (art, the subject, etc.), which in turn attests to the failed attempt to attain the excessive, transgressive, and irrecoverable negativity Bataille fervently seeks in sacrifice. Such is, in essence, the “unsacrificeable”: reconstituting negativity and death themselves into positive finite form.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 87.

In essence, Bataille and Nancy envision two different forms of negativity in sacrifice. Whereas Bataille's is radical, excessive, and purely expropriative, Nancy's is conservative, useful, and dialectical. Bataille's oeuvre gives us reason to believe--as I do--that his thinking on sacrifice illustrates *neither* the complete reappropriation (Nancy) or complete expropriation (Bataille) of negativity/death. Whereas the mimesis implied in sacrifice for Nancy testifies to and completes the operation of its inherent negativity, its "truth," the critic Elizabeth Arnould gives reason to believe that mimesis--especially in the case of Bataille's poetics--produces still a certain irrecoverable excess. In her essay "The Impossible Sacrifice of Poetry: Bataille and the Nancian Critique of Sacrifice," Arnould compellingly challenges Nancy's argument by way of Bataille's critique of poetry, which she claims illustrates the "structural undecidability of sacrifice" in Bataille's poetics.<sup>80</sup> Taking Bataille's account of Rimbaud's renunciation poetry as a centerpiece--an act Bataille considers to be the departure point for all new poetry--Arnould claims that such a sacrificial disavowal of the poet's own identity both inaugurates a new identity for the modern poet while robbing him/her of this identity through imitating this self-sacrificial disavowal. Such is the mandate for all poets after Rimbaud, "to imitate the moment of the 'poetical *lamma sabachtani*' where the desperate crucifixion of words defines the 'impossible' laws of a new poetics."<sup>81</sup> As a result, the sacrifice of poetry by the "poet" refuses complete sublation because of the mandate to imitate an impossible act--the poet's sacrifice of poetry--infinitely, even *excessively*. The poet must somehow write the cessation of writing, and thus "take into account Rimbaud's 'silent contestation' (*contestation sans phrases*), imitate its sacrifice, and write under the

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<sup>80</sup> See Elisabeth Arnould, "The Impossible Sacrifice of Poetry: Bataille and the Nancian Critique of Sacrifice," *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism* 26, no. 2 (1996): 93.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*: 92.

imperative of its impossibility.”<sup>82</sup> Such a task marks not only the impossibility of the simultaneous achievement and failure of poetry, or even that of the poet’s simultaneous identity and dis-identification (which would support Nancy’s analysis), but also the infinite deferral of the poet and poetry themselves through an endless and impossible imitation of what is impossible to write: how does one imitate the inimitable endlessly? In other words: how does one mime nothingness or infinity themselves? “In what does this imitation consist?” she asks, “How can one write sacrifice or, for that matter, the impossibility of writing? And how can one imitate a gesture that, or so it seems, forever forbids all imitation?” The *infinite* possibilities for the *finite* representation of “poetic sacrifice” renders it thus effectively *impossible*, and testifies to the *excessive* quality of self-sacrifice, indeed I would say the excessive quality of all such imitation resulting from such a sacrifice.<sup>83</sup>

Arnould’s argument sheds light more broadly on the paradoxical function of negativity/death in Bataille’s sacrifice. Though Arnould does not explore this point, she implies that excess confounds the complete sublation of sacrifice by evincing a negativity *categorically different* from and the one produced and presumably re-appropriated (“trans-appropriated”) by the (self-)sacrifice of writing or poetry. How is it different? I would argue that sacrifice in Bataille entails at least two functionally different forms of negativity, a claim implied in my analysis above. The first form would be *mimetic* in the manner Nancy suggests, whereby all sacrifices reduplicate the same “truth” of sacrifice, and thus essentially the same “original” sacrifice that comprehensively prebinds all sacrifices. “Mimesis, *mais répétition*,” Nancy writes, “le sacrifice n’est dépassé que pour un mode plus élève, plus vrai, de la logique

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.: 93.

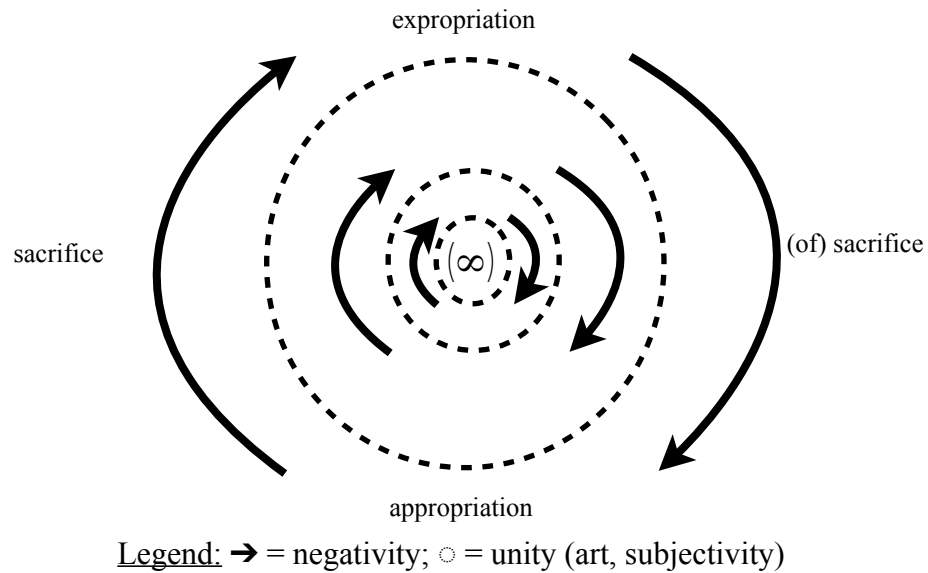
<sup>83</sup> “In other terms,” Arnould writes, “sacrifice can only write itself over and over because what it seeks to overcome is what makes its gesture both necessary and necessarily extraneous, not coincidental but merely incidental: the inappropriability of an excess neither present nor absent” (Ibid.: 96).

sacrificielle.”<sup>84</sup> Mimesis and repetition are captured within the essence of sacrifice, and thus enable all sacrifices to be part of the same unity. Mimesis would thus characterize the more conservative, apophatic ontotheological negativity he describes.

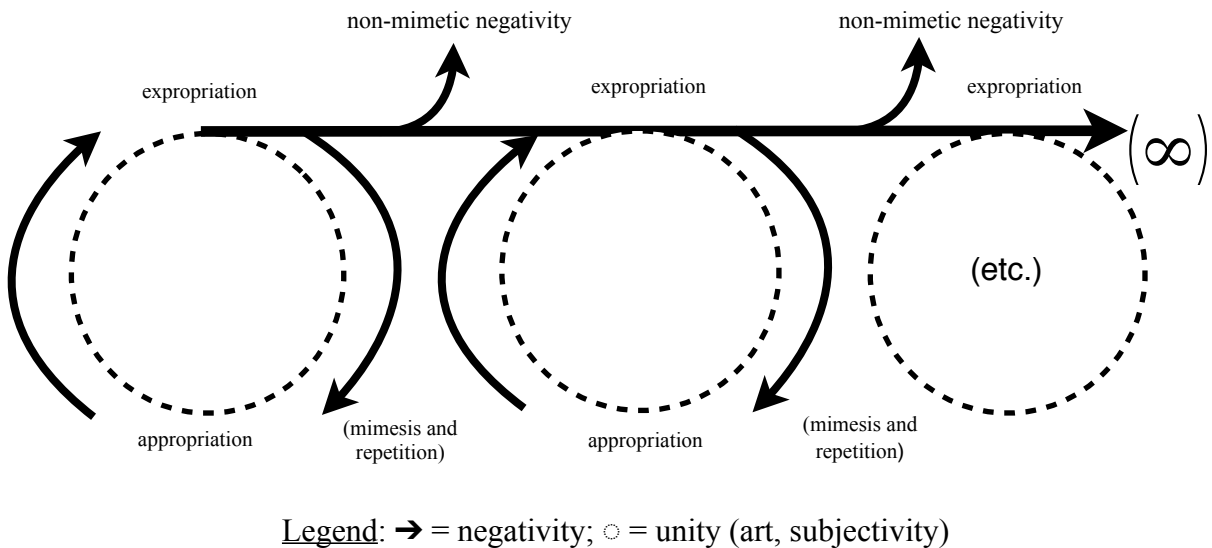
Yet the negativity that precludes or challenges this mimesis due to (what Bataille might call) “the impossible,” however, describes an *inimitable* or *non-mimetic* negativity that exceeds the regime of mimetic representation and thus renders incomplete, if not provisional, the dialectical unity presumably achieved in sacrifice. The mimesis that sacrifice implies, while necessary, is yet ultimately “impossible” to achieve due to this non-mimetic negativity. While this form of negativity ultimately *divorces* Bataille’s notion of sacrifice from the Hegelian architecture Nancy suggests, the former *departs from* the general economy of radical expenditure Bataille himself insists upon. To wit, both forms of negativity--the mimetic and inimitable, the ontotheological and “atheological”--are equally constitutive of self-sacrifice in Bataille, as well as those who share his conception of sacrifice, including Laure and Leiris. On the one hand a form of radical expenditure, on the other a resource re-appropriated in subjectivity or art, it would seem that sacrifice for Bataille (and the other authors here considered) represents a *negative dialectics* between life and death, identity and difference, one whose synthesis offers tentative, albeit incomplete closure. What results from the sacrifice of sacrifice is the ultimately unproductive reproduction of sacrifice itself, its *incomplete*--yet tentatively *identifiable*--sublation. This result recurs due to two different yet complementary phenomena: 1) the “sacrifice of sacrifice” as Nancy suggests, or the positive and finite re-appropriation of negativity; and 2) an excessive negativity expressed *through* such finite and repetitive appropriation. Whereas the first gives form to the sacrifice as art or subjectivity, the

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<sup>84</sup> Nancy, “L’Insacriable,” 78.



**Figure 1.1.** Jean Luc Nancy's dialectical model of sacrifice. “‘Rien’ n’est pas un abîme ouvert au dehors. ‘Rien’ affirme la finitude, et ce ‘rien’, aussitôt, ramène l’existence à elle-même, et à rien d’autre...L’existence, en ce sens, c’est-à-dire en son sens propre, est insacrifiable” (Nancy, “L’insacrifiable,” 103-4).



**Figure 1.2.** Model of sacrifice as negative dialectics, illustrating simulation and performativity. Whereas Nancy unifies all sacrifice within existence as bounded by negativity, the model above, (representative of Bataillian sacrifice) permits plurality within existence due to the different functions of mimetic and non-mimetic negativity.



second heralds possible art and subjects yet to come, and thus their individual implicit failure.

When Bataille writes, for example, that “l’homme du sacrifice donne à la mort une destinée plus grande” in his essay “Le sacrifice,” for example, he effectively illustrates this very dualism: not only does the *l’homme du sacrifice* realize his own mortal identity through sacrifice (*TU ES tragédie*)--which might support the ontotheological grounding of the subject--but death itself is given a new future on the horizon of this sacrifice, one that exceeds the particular result to which *l’homme du sacrifice* is bound and in which God is absent; this is its “destinée plus grande.”<sup>85</sup> Sacrifice in Bataille thus transforms both the subject and the nature of this transformation itself, revealing a plausible middle-ground for the dialectics of sacrifice that rests between Bataille’s desired radical expenditure and Nancy’s more conservative Hegelian schema. Sacrifice, as a form of *negative dialectics*, presents thus less the sublation of life and death, expropriation and appropriation, than their continual transformation in and through unresolved dialectical encounter. And such a transformation necessarily begs the question of identity, the provisional and dialectical result of this encounter (**Figures 1.1-1.2**).

Emblematic of the distinction between these two forms of negativity is Bataille’s distinction in *L’expérience intérieure* between the “self-who-dies” (*moi-qui-meurt*) and the “self-who-lives” (*moi-qui-vit*). As dual modes of identity, these two categories--analytic, not binary--of selfhood find themselves commonly tethered to death as their primary condition; their difference arises only in their reaction to or comportment toward death itself. The self-who-dies reveals itself in ecstasy, eroticism, and inner-experience only in this negativity “itself,” without recourse to or

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<sup>85</sup> Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, 238.

accordance with “what exists” (*ce qui existe*); the self-who-dies cannot be *mimetically* represented “in life,” so to speak; the self-who-dies is realized only in death, which properly understood means it can only be “unrealized.” It “abandons its link” (*abandonne cet accord*) with life and existence; it “véritablement aperçoit ce qui l’entoure comme un vide et soi-même comme un défi à ce vide.” The self-who-lives, on the other hand, exists as a challenge (*défi*) to death, but in its defiance, it remains only a tentative, masked emanation of death itself, which is both its inevitable end and primary condition. The self-who-lives of course also dies, but does so *as if* it is not dying: it is a *mimesis of death in the guise of life*. The self-who-lives is a prescient or portentous “sign” of death, which in itself, in its radical negativity, cannot be signified: “le moi-qui-vit se borne à pressentir le vertige où tout finira” writes Bataille.<sup>86</sup> Ultimately, the self-who-lives signals only that it ultimately does not truly signal “le vide” or “le vertige où tout finira,” but instead only *mimics* this signification, indirectly, obliquely, even *negatively* through an equivocal portentousness, a “feeling,” or even perhaps an “inner-experience.” Insofar as death is a negativity that cannot be positively signified,<sup>87</sup> the portentous “sign” of death, in its turn, betrays its own betrayal as a sign by negating the absolute negativity of death through signification. In other words, the self-who-lives is a sign that is not [the sign of what [is not]]; it is a form of mimesis, copy, or simulacrum. In contrast to the non-mimetic negativity of the self-who-dies, the self-who-lives mimes this negativity through negating this negativity itself.

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<sup>86</sup> Bataille, *L'expérience intérieure*, 85-6.

<sup>87</sup> “Nous ne pouvons nous représenter la mort” writes Bataille. “Nous pouvons en même temps savoir que sa représentation n’est pas correcte. La proposition que nous faisons au sujet de la mort est toujours entachée d’un minimum d’erreur.” (———, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 8, 193).

An untitled poem from *L'expérience intérieure* illustrates the dual dimension of personal identity described above, as well as the encounter between mimetic and non-mimetic negativity:

Qui suis-je  
pas “moi” non non  
mais le désert la nuit l’immensité  
que je suis  
qu’est-ce  
déserte immensité nuit bête  
vite néant sans retour  
et sans rien avoir su...<sup>88</sup>

An unknown speaker asks an equally unknown interlocutor to respond to him/her, to the “I” that questions. But the “I” that questions is not the “I” that is answered, for the “I” in the poem is not—and never is—exactly the same “I.” The “I,” as the poem later reveals, remains only a provisional and fictive totality, one that operates by excluding, even perhaps *producing* all of that which is presumably “not I” (*pas “moi”*): the desert, the night, immensity. Whereas the first “I” in the poem initially implies the speaker’s identity as a whole, the *mimetic* “moi” that s/he refutes, it also thereby delineates the “not I” (*pas “moi”*) or the *non-mimetic* “excess” implied by this self-determination, however. In other words, if this first “I” can call itself a self, a “moi,” then that which it excludes in order to make this determination somehow also constitutes the determination *itself*. The “mimetic self” in the poem (*moi*)--the subject I create by repeatedly referencing it as “self”--is also *not* itself (*pas moi*) in some fundamental way. As s/he says, the “I” is “pas ‘moi,’ non, non”; rather, it is something else,

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<sup>88</sup> Georges Bataille, *L'expérience intérieure*, 183. The conceit of Bataille’s poem strikingly recalls Judith Butler’s analysis of performative subjectivity in *The Psychic Life of Power*: “To claim that this is what I am,” writes Butler, “is to suggest a provisional totalization of this ‘I.’ But if the I can so determine itself, then that which it excludes in order to make that determination remains constitutive of the determination itself. In other words, such a statement presupposes that the ‘I’ exceeds its determination, and even produces that very excess in and by the act which seeks to exhaust the semantic field of that ‘I’” (Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 309).

somewhere else, “deserted,” lost in the immensity of the night. The “I” implies *also* the dark desert of not “I,” not “me,” indeed everything else, else nothing in particular, no-thing at all. This nothingness, this nocturnal and deserted immensity that seemingly undoes identity (*pas “moi”*) also partially reconstitutes it: it is the “désert immensité nuit bête / *que je suis*” the speaker says. As s/he suggests, identity therefore implies non-identity, and selfhood implies an inexorable otherness that cannot, does not completely mime the I, and yet accompanies it. Thus the interrogative, provisional I (*je*) never completely returns; it becomes “pas moi,” a “néant sans retour.” The response to the speaker’s original question “Who am I?” thus cannot be given simply, since the “I” that questioned no longer completely exists in the response. Indeed, it *never really had completely existed*, since the “I” that questions is—or was—always already the immense dark desert: the “pas moi.” The “I” bears within its own immense nothingness, such that the “pas moi”--the impossible response to the speaker’s question “Qui suis-je?”--answers successfully, albeit tentatively in its failure. Indeed, as the speaker explains, “nothing” (*rien*) is learned in the response (*sans rien avoir su*), which means not only that “no particular lesson” is learned, but that nothingness proper *is* the lesson.

In “Le tombeau,” Bataille writes analogously “le néant n’est que moi-même.” Selfhood is *annihilated*, rendered nothing, as much as it is constituted *only* (*n’est que*) by such nothingness. As the poem above illustrates, is it not so much the subject that undergoes mimesis through negativity; rather, it is the state of subjectivity itself, the retracing and recrossing of the limits that delineate selfhood from the deserted night of nothingness. The declaration that “I am not what I am” in the poem above is not tautology, therefore, but rather the paradoxical, iterative practice of identification itself; the continual (re-)becoming of the “I” in the act identification. This practice fortuitously captures the semantic richness of the French *répétition* which refers at

once to “redoing” and “rehearsal”; in essence, the repetition of the “I” is a dramatic performance, a kind of role play, and the character one plays at the moment of uttering “I” will not be exactly the same in the next utterance. The “difference” between these two “I”s cannot, nor can ever, therefore be fully *mimed*. Identity—in the strong sense of the Latin *idem* (“sameness”)—is therefore impossible for Bataille’s subject *strictu sensu*, since a non-mimetic foreignness, estrangement, or negativity is identity’s very condition of possibility. That there is identity at all, however, implies a sameness or mimicking of the conditions--whether ontological, linguistic, or juridical--that give rise to the subject. While the means are mimetic, the ends endlessly differ: *Qui suis-je? Pas moi...que je suis.*

***Sacrifice and Simulation.*** In an account that strongly anticipates the concerns of Nancy’s essay, Pierre Klossowski in “A propos du simulacre dans la communication de Georges Bataille” draws attention to precisely this feature of Bataille’s identity critique.<sup>89</sup> While Bataille defends and promotes the dissolution of the subject in deadly experiences like ecstasy and sacrifice, such dissolution seems to be recaptured by the subject in limit experiences and, to be sure, poetic language. Like Agamben after him, Klossowski underscores the role that pathos plays in Bataille for re-inscribing subjectivity. Supported by Bataille’s own assertions, Klossowski claims the search for death reached in pathetic moments of sovereign experience like ecstasy, laughter, anguish, orgasm, or tears is still wed to personal identity and subjective experience, however much they hearken toward the deadly hereafter. In his response to Bataille’s *L’expérience intérieure* and its ecstatic “méthode de méditation” Klossowski writes:

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<sup>89</sup> For an excellent analysis of Klossowski’s response to Bataille, see Ian James, “From Recuperation to Simulacrum: Klossowski’s Reading of Bataille,” in *The Beast at Heaven’s Gate: Georges Bataille and the Art of Transgression*, edited by Andrew Hussey, New York: Rodopi, 2006, 91-100. James argues that Klossowski actually presents two divergent readings of Bataille in his career, that together constitute an “impossible” decision for all readers of Bataille: they may either agree that Bataille treads along the path of the impossible and expenditure, or that these always get recuperated along the path, indeed as “the path.”

Un sujet existant, expérimentant sa discontinuité, soit la fuite de l'être hors de existence, subsiste dès que son rire, ses larmes, ses effusions--en un mot son pathos se trouvent par lui désignés comme moments souverains, et cet existant, porté fortuitement à la vacance du moi...ne les recherche en tant que moments souverains nécessairement qu'à partir de son moi réintègre, donc à partir de la servitude de l'identité...cela à chaque fois qu'il veut enseigner cette méthode de méditation.<sup>90</sup>

Moments of pathos recapture the flight towards sacrificial self-absence (*porté fortuitement à la vacance du moi*) in those “sovereign” moments of inner-experience where pathos is felt and expressed by the self; such moments thus become possible only on the precondition of identity, to which it becomes ironically bound in servitude (*à partir de la servitude de l'identité*). There thus can be no actual sovereignty experienced or expressed without a concomitant submission to the limits of subjectivity, those limits sovereign experience was to breach in delivering the subject to its inner negativity. To play upon Klossowski's conceit, one might say that there is “no sovereignty without subjects”; indeed, the “sovereign” himself is always already himself a subject, bound to the limits of selfhood insofar as he exceeds or even the attempts to exceed them in ecstasy or inner-experience. Thus when Bataille writes that such experience “modifie le sujet qui s'y exerce,” the subject is “modified” only insofar as sovereignty, absence, and death are *experienced by a subject*, and thus recaptured within the bounds of subjectivity. Though subjectivity itself endures through such experience, the subject that experiences it, the *self* (*son moi*), though its subsequent “reintegration” (*réintègre*), nevertheless changes with every such experience. Again, sacrifice first expends *then* conserves, as Nancy and Mauss similarly explain.

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<sup>90</sup> Pierre Klossowski, "A propos du simulacre dans la communication de Georges Bataille," *Critique* 195-6(1963): 750.

For Klossowski, the question of subjectivity in Bataille hinges on the operation of this “reintegration,” to which I would parallel Nancy’s concept of trans-appropriation. Yet Klossowski does *not* insist on the dialectical sublation of the subject in the manner or to the degree Nancy does. The subject that reemerges from inner-experience is not precisely identical to its “disintegrated” forebear, since such would preclude the avowed “modification” (*modifier*) through such experience or even the experience itself. Whereas Bataille would suggest that such modification results in the disappearance of the subject, its absence, Klossowski argues that the subject so modified, instead, has become a simulacrum of itself, a copy, a (re)presentation of its own absence in and through its provisional subjective reintegration. As such, it is never *entirely* the same; it changes with each and every form of sacrifice. “Le recours au simulacre,” he explains, “ne retrouve cependant ni l’absence d’un événement réel ni ce qui remplace ce dernier.”<sup>91</sup> With each new reintegration occurs an incomplete *reidentification* of the subject that is neither entirely the same, nor entirely “other,” nor even the identification of sameness and otherness, but rather a “simulated” identity--i.e., a phantom, a masquerade--whereby that which resists all identification under language or law nonetheless confronts the insistence of language and law to identify. “Le simulacre au sens imitatif,” writes Klossowski, “est actualisation de quelque chose d’incommunicable en soi ou irréprésentable : proprement le ‘phantasme’ dans sa contrainte obsédante.”<sup>92</sup> This conflict between the unrepresentable and constraints of representation is seen in the poem above; identity becomes the repeated abolition of identity, that which it is, it is not--or *not yet*. Bataille begins, again and again, describing those notions that unmake him, that transform him into what he is not,

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.: 743.

<sup>92</sup> ———, *La ressemblance* (Marseille: André Dimanche, 1984), 76.

indeed what is not, nothingness itself, such that the very description manifests the “he” unmade, transformed. As Klossowski explains,

Quelque chose arrive à Bataille, quelque chose dont il parle comme si il ne lui arriverait pas...il ne s’attribue ni ne peut s’attribuer jamais un énoncé (d’expérience) assez défini qu’il ne se réfère aussitôt à *l’angoisse*, à la *gaieté*, à la désinvolture: puis il rit et il écrit qu’il *meurt* de rire ou qu’il *rit aux larmes*---état dans lequel l’expérience supprime le sujet.<sup>93</sup>

The experience of negativity culminates remains inexpressible, transforming the failure of language into laughter and tears; yet laughter and tears thereby become a “language,” so to speak, or more precisely a *simulated* language, which can signify only that it does not truly signify--or if it signifies at all, it (“significantly”) signifies “nothing.” In *L’expérience intérieure*, for example, Bataille speaks of anguish and tears ironically as signifiers of selfhood:

je puis saisir le *moi* en larmes dans l’angoisse (je puis même à perte de vue prolonger mon vertige et ne plus me trouver que dans le désir d’un autre--d’une femme--unique, irremplaçable, mourante, en chaque chose semblable à moi), mais c’est seulement quand la mort approchera que je saurai sans manquer ce dont il s’agit.<sup>94</sup>

Anguish and tears, while heralding the advent of death, nevertheless permit the recapture (*saisir*) of identity (i.e., the self-who-lives) *as* the self-who-dies. As a result, as Klossowski explains, Bataille must “développ[e] *encore une fois* à partir des notions, des identités la voie propre à ouvrir les notions, à abolir les identités--et de cette ouverture et de cette abolition ne saurait jamais donner autre chose que le simulacre.”<sup>95</sup> Describing and developing the means of self-absence and of

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<sup>93</sup> Klossowski, "A propos du simulacre dans la communication de Georges Bataille," 744.

<sup>94</sup> Bataille, *L’expérience intérieure*, 85.

<sup>95</sup> Klossowski, "A propos du simulacre dans la communication de Georges Bataille," 750. Emphasis mine.



“abolishing” identity nevertheless re-inscribes identity endlessly as a form of self-absence, self-abolition, and ultimately self-sacrifice: i.e., simulacrum.<sup>96</sup> Bataille’s subject seeks itself there where no self, or rather the “non-self,” cannot be found, but only *recreated* in and by the search itself. In a word, the subject can be only *performed*, and each performance, to use Klossowski’s nomenclature, represents the simulation of genuine, yet unattainable, subjectivity.

**Conclusion.** It is this re-appropriation of identity through the effort to expropriate it in different modes of self-sacrifice (in inner-experience, eroticism, sovereignty, etc.) that partially counteracts the avowed intentions of Bataille and his intellectual kin--especially Laure and Leiris--in their search for the experience of the sacred, death, or a negativity without end. The search for the sacred through sacrifice--which is also the self-sacrifice of sacrifice--broaches a concept of identity based on (self-)disidentification and (self-)simulation, an inexhaustible, repetitive, mimetic process of continual self-(re)realization. In a manner “identical” to Bataille’s work of art, identity itself represents the reproduced residues of sacred excess that they themselves ultimately *both use and exceed*. This may indeed be the ultimate result of what Bataille called the “impossible,” which in its attempt to (un)produce an impossible nothingness actually (re)produces the limits of possibility in the form of literature and, perhaps above all, of identity. This is what his literature “attains.” “Je crois même qu’en un sens mes récits *atteignent* clairement l’impossible,” Bataille writes; and insofar he claims this literature to be *his* (*mes récits*), there can be little doubt that, however indirectly, Bataille’s own disavowed authorial identity is likewise

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<sup>96</sup> It is in this vein that one might understand Bataille’s frequent use of letter-symbols for literary characters, their frequent name changes, or even indeed the overlaps of narrative voice. These features are most apparent, for example, in *L’Abbé C*, *Le mort*, and *L’histoire des rats*. See *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3.

“attained.”<sup>97</sup> The work and the author are commonly established, and then lost, in the impossible search for an expropriation without end.

The reproduction of identity through sacrifice becomes a kind of performativity, indeed a “performance art” that anticipates contemporary modes of identity critique. Whereas more recent theorists of performativity like Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick seek to explore the production of subjectivities within the regulatory regimes of discourse and cultural practice, however, writers like Bataille, Laure, and Leiris--who serve as the focus of this study--illustrate how the subject arises from the intersecting religious regimes of law and life, the “divine power” of the sacred, which is repeatedly, *ritualistically* confronted in the pursuit of divine and deadly excesses. But exactly what kind of subjects are produced through such a confrontation? How does the identity of such subject get (re)configured and (re-)produced as a result, and how might such subjection specifically inform contemporary critical debates on the specific production of gendered, sexed, and raced identities? For answers to these questions, it is necessary to take a closer look at the performativity of the sacred.

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<sup>97</sup> Georges Bataille, *L'impossible: Histoire de rats, suivi de Dianus et de L'Orestie*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1962), 9.

## CHAPTER II

### GEORGES BATAILLE AND THE SACRIFICE OF GENDER

*Je puis saisir moi en larmes, dans l'angoisse  
(je puis même à perte de vue prolonger mon  
vertige et ne plus me trouver que dans le désir  
d'un autre--d'une femme--unique,  
irremplaçable, mourante, en chaque chose  
semblable à moi).*

-Georges Bataille, *L'expérience intérieure* <sup>1</sup>

**Introduction.** To speak of “queerness” is not to speak of one thing, but of something that is *not* one. The German root of queer – *twer*, cognate of the English “thwart”—refers to the oblique, the crossed, the wrongheaded, that which goes against the grain, that which is not limited, not linear, not bounded, not “straight.” It’s Latinate synonym, common to English and French--“ec-centricity” (*l’eccentricité*)—auspiciously echoes the negativity of its Germanic cousin, referring to that which is “not centered.” Its other synonyms possess the same negativity as well: the unusual, the unfamiliar, the unorthodox, the uncanny. These definitions of queerness are, of course, all too orthodox and familiar in our public discourse on queerness, which frequently insists upon the alienating or marginalizing of differently gendered or sexed people. Less familiar and more “queer,” however, is the ontological role of negativity in queerness, the precise value and meaning of a thing that, by definition, “is not.” What is the philosophical significance of this negativity? How can one describe the negative space of queerness? Not centered, not straight, having neither point nor line as cartographic tools, “queerness” cannot properly delineate a space, meaning, or identity of its own without risking contradiction. To say that “queerness is not one” means, in some sense, that it remains in-between, always neither/nor, either/or; it is neither that from which it is said to differ, nor that from which another thing can

<sup>1</sup> Georges Bataille, *L'expérience intérieure* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 85.

entirely differ. Instead, one must imagine queerness, as its Germanic root suggests, as a kind of intersection, a crossing--or, as Georges Bataille might have called it, a kind of *transgression*. As such, queerness does not move from one territory into another. Rather, it passes from a territory into a deterritorialized realm, into the nomadic, the unbounded, the limitless, the unknown, what Bataille might have called a "sovereign," "heterogeneous," or "sacred" space beyond the reassuring limits of (sexual/gendered) identity and its normative regimes. It differs therefore not only from the limits that would otherwise contain it, constrain it, make it "one"--but also from itself--as that which by definition is not "one"--or rather simply *is not*. Queer identity—if one can speak of such a thing--does not and cannot exclude, though it is excluded, since, as queer, it *inherently* bears a certain exclusion and negativity within. Queerness is a stranger not only to others, but to itself. In this way, I would call "queer" Bataille's fictional and philosophical evocation of feminine identity.

Indeed, the question of queerness in Bataille studies, especially it relates to the common concerns of eroticism, death, and sacrifice, remains largely unexamined. While few have considered his relevance for contemporary queer critique, however, many have debated the significance and meaning of femininity in his work.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, this is expected, given the (hetero)sexist essentialism Bataille's writings frequently exhibit; in *L'érotisme* for example, Bataille writes "Il n'y a en chaque

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<sup>2</sup> Though this list is by no means exhaustive, I am referring in particular to Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1989), who contends the misogynistic violence that accompanies the sexual act in *Madame Edwarda*; Hélène Cixous, *Prénoms de personne*, Collection Poétique (Paris: Seuil, 1974), wherein Cixous situates the feminine within a general economy of expenditure and loss; Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: essai sur l'abjection* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1980), in which Kristeva references Bataille's proposition that the interdiction can never fully bar the abject or, for that matter, the feminine; Jane Gallop, *Intersections: a Reading of Sade with Bataille, Blanchot, and Klossowski* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), who evaluates Bataille's reception of Sade and the former's concept of the "sovereign man." Also worthy of note are Suzanne Guerlac, "'Recognition' by a Woman!: A Reading of Bataille's L'Erotisme," *Yale French Studies*, no. 78 (1990), Amy Hollywood, "Divi-ne Woman/Divine Women': The Return of the Sacred in Bataille, Lacan, and Irigaray," in *The Question of Christian Philosophy Today*, ed. Francis J. Ambrosio (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999); Susan Rubin Suleiman, "Bataille in the Street: The Search for Virility in the 1930s," in *Bataille: Writing the Sacred*, ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill (Routledge, London, 1995).

femme une prostituée en puissance, mais la prostitution est la conséquence de l'attitude féminine."<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, fact is surprising given how much Bataille is read and referenced in relation to identity critique, sexuality studies, and the editor of his complete works--Michel Foucault--whose importance for contemporary study of gender and sexuality is beyond dispute. The breadth and variety of feminist scholarship on Bataille by figures as diverse as Andrea Dworkin, Hélène Cixous, Lucette Finas, Julia Kristeva, and Jane Gallop testifies not only to the controversial complexity of feminine identity in his oeuvre; it also illustrates how the feminine offers a unique segue into the more perennial concerns of eroticism, death, and personal identity so commonplace and indispensable for Bataille and his readers.

For this reason, it is unnecessary, perhaps even mistaken, to ignore feminist scholarship in emerging queer critiques, which broach kindred issues of gender and sexuality albeit with different presumptions, goals, or interpretive frames. Indeed, I would argue that some feminist scholarship on Bataille anticipates queer critique in a manner analogous to Bataille's own female characters, who like Madame Edwarda herald self-dissolution into a "queer" space of ecstasy and death. In this way, it is possible to read the feminine in Bataille as a privileged category not only for understanding his figuration of gender, but also its self-critique. Such a reading might also illustrate Bataille's significance for emerging theoretical rapprochements between feminism and queer studies.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Georges Bataille, *L'érotisme* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1957), 145.

<sup>4</sup> While several queer theorists (like Judith Butler) have typically opposed feminism and queerness due to the essentializing tendency of the former, sociologists Corie Hammers and Alan Brown argue that sociological research in gender and sexuality can benefit from a "feminist-queer alliance" that challenges traditional epistemological frames of man/woman, gay/straight, etc. in defense of multiple forms of femininity in Corie Jo Hammers, "Not for Men Only : The (De)-construction of Lesbian/Queer Public Sexualities" (Thesis, University of Oklahoma, 2005) and Corie Jo and Brown Hammers, Alan D., "Towards a Feminist-Queer Alliance: A Paradigmatic Shift in the Research Process," *Social Epistemology* 18, no. 1 (2004). Kathy Rudy makes a similar case in Kathy Rudy, "Queer Theory and Feminism," *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 29, no. 2 (2000). For Butler's argument concerning feminism, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 6-10.

The feminine is an exceptional category precisely because it illustrates where and how Bataille—even despite himself—confounds the limits of the masculine and feminine. Rather than a binaristic or even analytic alternative to the masculine, the feminine masks a form of queerness that grounds the construction of identity, masculine and feminine both, into priests, prostitutes, lovers, beloveds, whores, and mothers. To be sure, to claim that the feminine is “exceptional” in this way seems to imply a challenge to the goals of queer critique; how can one simultaneously defend the exceptional status of femininity in Bataille and yet claim the feminine not actually to be feminine *per se*, but rather a masked form of queerness, a subversion of femininity itself? Two subtle negotiations must be made to respond to this question. The first concerns conceiving gender in Bataille as a *kind* or as a *degree* of subjectivity; the second concerns the *means* and *ends* of Bataille’s critique of the subject, specifically as it relates to his conceptions of transgression and sacrifice. Provisionally, it will suffice to say that gendered identity in Bataille is itself provisional, permitting for tentative differences between masculine subjects and abject femininity, between potent and impotent men, between holy and whorish women that, to varying degrees, commonly herald the queerly common and communal space of eroticism and death in which these are redone along a continuum of possible genders and sexualities. Ultimately, I would argue that queerness in Bataille concerns the inherently *self-sacrificial* quality of all subjectivity in Bataille, whether masculine or feminine. As I argue below, the concept and function of sacrifice in Bataille offers an unexplored entry point into the queer qualities of his work.

***Queering Bataille.*** The following argument concerning the queer aspect of sacrifice in Bataille merits a brief discussion of the scarce queer scholarship on his work. Only recently have critics begun to recognize the incomparably rich theoretical and literary itinerary Bataille offers for queer critique; this is a surprising fact given

Bataille's popularity for feminist, gender, and sexuality studies and the editor of his complete works--Michel Foucault--whose importance for queer studies is beyond dispute. In her new edited book *Reading Bataille Now*, Shannon Winnubst invites comparison of Lacan and Bataille in the essay "Bataille's Queer Pleasures: The Universe as Spider and Spit," wherein she seeks to renew the latter's significance as writer and thinker of queer desire.<sup>5</sup> Her approach to Bataille revisits familiar theoretical terrain for queer studies via Lacan and Foucault, who commonly investigate the discursive impasses that arise from the "never-ending quest of desire" as she calls it. Citing *L'usage des plaisirs*, for example, she claims that Foucault's brand of desire, at least in his reading of the Greeks, presents a double-bind wherein the subject's lack is problematically also the lamented source of its pleasurable fulfillment. "Desire thereby misleads us doubly for Foucault: it reads our subjectivity as anchored in an ontological lack and simultaneously locks us into the nostalgic quest for that pure origin of fullness and plenitude."<sup>6</sup>

Winnubst goes on to explain that Lacanian lack is found in the Real which "articulate[s] the limits of knowledge and representation as [it] constitutes the limits of

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<sup>5</sup> There is a rich body of criticism that explores the theoretical harmonies between Lacan and Bataille, which can be understood as an important precursor to queer criticism. Among the first of these is Carolyn J. Dean, *The Self and its Pleasures : Bataille, Lacan, and the History of the Decentered Subject* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), which posits the two at the center of the idea of decentered subjectivity in French intellectual history; Jean Dragon, "The Work of Alterity: Bataille and Lacan," *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism* 26, no. 2 (1996), which interrogates the importance of feminine alterity for both figures. Juan Carlos Ubilluz's recent *Sacred Eroticism: Georges Bataille and Pierre Klossowski and the Latin American Novel* offers a compelling account of the theoretical kinship Bataille and Lacan share. Ubilluz presents Bataille's sacred feminine as Lacan's concept of the Thing in *L'éthique de psychanalyse*, the "extimate object" (*objet ex-time*) or "intimate exteriority" (*extériorité intime*) which treads upon the path of anal eroticism, the death drive, and *jouissance*. For Lacan and Bataille alike, he claims, woman poses a threat to subjectivity, being "an ambiguous sign between presence and absence...the not-whole object a (*petit objet a*)...the ruined poetic image that take author and reader from the meaning of discourse to the rupture/rapture of *jouissance*, from the known to the unknown" (Juan Carlos Ubilluz, *Sacred Eroticism : Georges Bataille and Pierre Klossowski in the Latin American Erotic Novel*, The Bucknell studies in Latin American Literature and Theory [Lewisburg Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 2006], 87).

<sup>6</sup> Shannon Winnubst, "Bataille's Queer Pleasures: The Universe as Spider or Spit," in *Reading Bataille Now*, ed. Shannon Winnubst (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 79.

our experiences of desire.”<sup>7</sup> These “constitutive limits,” in turn, invite Bataille’s thinking on transgression as a mode of identity critique.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Bataille enters the argument almost as a kind of synoptic figure, an intellectual link between Foucault and Lacan’s quite divergent approaches, insofar as

they all recognize, albeit differently, how this dynamic of desire emerges primarily through the logic of prohibition and transgression. Whether [as] Lacan’s Law of the Father or Foucault’s analysis of ‘the Repressive Hypothesis,’ prohibition functions as the mechanism through which subjectivity is cathected.<sup>9</sup>

Winnubst’s analysis as a result risks collapsing the uniqueness of these different figures and their respective projects into an ethereal metadiscourse on lack, limits, and transgression. To buttress the relationship among these different figures, she writes simply and surprisingly “both Foucault and Lacan read Bataille.”<sup>10</sup>

While the conceptual harmonies between these figures cannot be disputed, and while the nuance due to these different figures may be beyond the purview of her argument, the equation is not so simple. The lack or prohibition that compels desire functions differently in Lacan, Foucault, and Bataille in a manner that may not shed reciprocal illumination nor serve the goals of queer critique. In his seminar “La relation d’objet,” for example, Lacan distinguishes among three different kinds of lack--“imaginary frustration,” (*frustration imaginaire*), “privation” (*privation*), and the most important, “symbolic castration” (*castration symbolique*)--which in turn denote three different lacking objects--the “imaginary phallus” (*phallus imaginaire*), the “real breast” (*le sien*), and finally the “symbolic phallus” (*phallus symbolique*). While all

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 85.



lack metonymically hearkens ontological absence--“le désir est la métonymie du manque à être” Lacan writes--all function differently *vis à vis* the Other and the Sign, and are not simply reducible to a primary ontological lack, the *manque à être*. Rather, it is how the psyche negotiates this lack among the Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic that determines the outcome of desire for self-identity.

Foucault’s analysis of the use of pleasures (*aphrodesia*) in Ancient Greece illustrates the intimate relationship that the self-governance of desire and pleasure shares with Greek subjectivity. The practice of governing one’s pleasures, which Foucault calls a form of *savoir-faire* or *art de vivre*, grants the self an ethical form of autonomy, which might be understood as independence from the self’s *own* excessive tendencies. Greek sexuality for Foucault is thus a form of ethical and aesthetic autonomy, an “esthétique de l’existence, l’art réfléchi d’une liberté perçue comme jeu de pouvoir.”<sup>11</sup> In this sense, power might be understood as the ludic freedom to “self-stylize,” a liberating vision of sexuality quite distant from the double-bind of desire Winnubst sees in Foucault’s *Histoire de la sexualité*. To be sure, the Greek philosophy of self-governance and self-creation stands in stark contrast to contemporary queer theory’s more constructivist approach to the subject; moreover, such preoccupations with autonomy are far removed from Bataille’s celebratory embrace of alterity and anomic self-obliteration, wherein one’s sovereignty *from oneself* is found. Thus does Bataille link sovereignty with a communitarian otherness. “Le sujet quelconque,” Bataille writes, “maintenant la valeur souveraine opposée à la subordination de l’objet [et] possède cette valeur en partage avec tous les hommes.”<sup>12</sup>

To its merit, however, Winnubst’s study persuasively identifies at least two analytically distinct modes of queerness in Bataille’s work, which themselves have

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<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité: l’usage des plaisirs*, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 91.

<sup>12</sup> Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 8, 285.

become veritable commonplaces in queer criticism. This gesture is successful in bringing Bataille into dialogue with queer criticism's extant concerns, and insofar as these two modes commonly relate to anal eroticism and the death drive, one might say psychoanalytic criticism as well. The first—polymorphous perversity—is obvious in Bataille's fiction, especially in *Histoire de l'oeil*, wherein characters frequently and fetishistically transfix their desire onto a sordid amalgam of objects, body parts, and detritus, such that heteronormative desire is overturned.<sup>13</sup> “Brimming with arms, hands, blood, eyes, heads, urine, dirt, ejaculations, and eggs,” she writes, “these are stories of bodies and fluids and very odd, very queer, pleasures.”<sup>14</sup> The very listing of these various objects seems to suggest some of the “constitutive limits” mentioned above that, though ignored in Winnubst's analysis, nevertheless reveal the performative mutability of desire in Bataille. The second mode of queerness, not unrelated to the first, concerns non-productive sexuality--what Foucault called *ars erotica*--a conception of sex devoid of reproductive purpose and motivated purely by pleasure and desire. She rightly finds and positions this mode within Bataille's notions of eroticism, general economy, and prodigal expenditure, which rend “the logic of utility at the heart of sexuality” from the queer desire that subtends and subverts it. Winnubst claims that, correctly understood, such queerness “needn't necessarily be understood as properly ‘sexual’ at all,” but rather as an unmitigated and inexhaustible form of desire. In this way, Winnubst's account of desire appropriately broaches Bataille's radical conception of eroticism, which comprises not only sexual

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<sup>13</sup> Feminist critic Judith Still was among the first to make this critical observation concerning polymorphous perversity, but comes to different conclusions concerning sexual difference. “In *My Mother*, Pierre is circulated between women in almost a reversal of the hom(m)o-sexual economy--his name begins to conjure up *pierres précieuses*, reminding us of what Bataille wrote about jewels. ‘In the unconscious, jewels, like excrement, are cursed matter that flow from a wound’ (Judith Still, “Horror in Kristeva and Bataille: Sex and Violence,” *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* 20, no. 3 [1997]: 230).

<sup>14</sup> Winnubst, “Bataille's Queer Pleasures: The Universe as Spider or Spit,” 89.

experience, but intoxication, love, and religion as well.<sup>15</sup>

Beyond bringing Bataille within the realm of queer studies, Winnubst also laudably seeks to highlight Bataille's practical significance for queer politics and activism. She writes that Bataille's "non-teleological framing of experience would de-center several of the normative assumptions that seem to be paralyzing l/g/b/t political movements." In other words, the mobility of sexual desire in Bataille illustrates how different sexual identities (l/g/b/t) are merely differing effects of a common, prior ontological lack within the subject, one which might serve as a theoretical rally point for the factions among gender activists. Bataille could be instructive for these activists, insofar as he would remind them of a "common" queer desire prior to any particular object. This gesture, however noble, remains problematic on two grounds.

The first concerns the possibility of appropriating Bataille for democratic political ends--or any "end" for that matter, as Bataille's tendentious insistence on the infinite and *inachevé* would suggest. As Winnubst herself notes in her reading of *La part maudite*—a text whose entire project is to illustrate how excess both founds and confounds all forms of socio-political organization—civilization is based on the exclusion of all forms of "non-productive expenditure" such as non-reproductive sex. To be sure, Bataille makes it fairly clear in *L'érotisme* that reproduction lies squarely within the restricted economy of "discontinuity," though its origin and end are the "continuum" or general economy of eroticism and death. Whereas "la reproduction me en jeu des êtres discontinus," death "a le sens de la continuité de l'être."<sup>16</sup> Yet Winnubst seems to suggest at the same time that Bataille's unproductive eroticism is nevertheless "productive," as it were, by providing an illustration of a common

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<sup>15</sup> In the introduction to *L'érotisme*, Bataille distinguishes among "l'érotisme des corps, l'érotisme des coeurs, [et] enfin l'érotisme sacré," which respectively comprise the physical, affective, and spiritual dimensions of erotic experience (Georges Bataille, *L'érotisme*, 22).

<sup>16</sup> Georges Bataille, *L'érotisme* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1957), 18-9.

multisexual, pansexual, or polymorphously perverse desire that typically serves l/g/b/t politics through divorcing sexuality from the regime of reproduction. She appropriates Bataille's conception of desire, for example, as a lesson for political activists fighting sodomy laws. "If queer acts of pleasure are to dislodge the totalizing restricted economies of desire-prohibition-teleology, it may be through the valorizing of their very lack of purpose."<sup>17</sup> Yet this desire that she compellingly highlights would remain ultimately unbound to any particular political identity or political end--even those ends that would presumably serve queer politics. Evidence for this can be found not only in *La part maudite*, but also in Bataille's earlier interwar writings, wherein the ultimate "end" of political engagement is the obliteration of statehood and subjectivity, ends quite divorced from the more democratic program that motivates Winnubst's argument. To appropriate Bataille for democratic ends, however noble, necessarily risks decontextualization, misappropriation, or misunderstanding of his critique of subjectivity and democracy; in his early political writings, Bataille considers democracy to be the other Janusian face of capitalism, if not fascism as well.<sup>18</sup>

The second concerns the gesture to neutralize different sexual identities found in Bataille as equivalent effects of desire. By insisting on the desirous lack that ultimately makes all sexuality pleasurable and unproductive expenditure, she eclipses the representation of particular sexed and gendered identities in Bataille, which are

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>18</sup> Susan Suleiman, for example, illustrates why "it did not occur to Bataille or other revolutionaries on the revolutionary Left to start defending the bourgeois democracies against the threat of fascism" (Susan Rubin Suleiman, "Bataille in the Street: The Search for Virility in the 1930s," 36). As she implies, the Marxist allegiances of the interwar French Left of which Bataille was part held democracy to be a bourgeois form of government preluding fascism. Hence Bataille's emphasis on an anarchic, "acephalic" society that resists systematic organization and governance and allows for ongoing anomie, ecstasy, and exuberance.

hardly equal in significance.<sup>19</sup> To wit, she provides no specific examples of either heteronormative or queer desire in Bataille's work. While desire may be a monolithic idea for Bataille, the sordid effects of desire which, as she rightly claims "needn't be sexual at all," are difficult to prove entirely equivalent in Bataille, especially as these effects relate to gender and sex. For example, his narrators, like Pierre in *Ma mère* or Troppmann in *Le bleu du ciel*, are typically heterosexual male subjects who, in pursuit of their desires, experience a disorienting ecstasy that subverts their subjectivity and upturns the object of their desire. Such is the case elsewhere for his male bullfighters, revolutionaries, and lovers alike. While it is certainly difficult to determine which came first--the subject or its subversive desire--the primacy of the heterosexual male desire in Bataille's oeuvre is beyond question, and cannot be easily explained as a consequence equal to "other" sexualities in Bataille. These other sexualities seem to be only aftereffects of a failed masculinity or its complement--a disruptive femininity--which reveal themselves in Bataille's erotic scenarios. It is always the heteronormative desire for the woman that precipitates the downfall of the heterosexual male subject, its fusion with the desired female object, and thus, finally, the dialectically discovered queerness of desire itself.

While it could be persuasively argued that such queerness is constitutive of desire prior to the heterosexual pursuits of Bataille's protagonists, it nevertheless remains true that a heteronormative logic frames the scenario in which such queerness

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<sup>19</sup> Equally questionable, but related, is her implied distillation of these different identities for queer politics; for some time, queer scholars and activists have debated the problems that arise in conflating lesbian, gay, trans-sexed, transgendered, and queer identities for political purposes, since such a gesture ironically supports a heteronormative logic of sexual identity by positing as "other" all non-heteronormative sex and genders and/or eclipses factors of class and race. Winnubst herself gesturally notes that "g/l/t/b political movements have suffered from an inability to articulate our political agency effectively without recourse to the the essentializing moves of identity politics" (Ibid., 91). Activist Jamie Heckert writes in a similar vein that "collective organization in order to reduce feelings of isolation and to resist oppression are worthwhile efforts. However, the success of this approach has been limited in its own terms; heteronormativity remains dominant throughout many social contexts" (Jaimie Heckert, "Towards Consenting Relations: Anarchism and Sexuality," Infoshop.org, [http://infoshop.org/library/heckert:\\_Anarchism\\_and\\_Sexuality](http://infoshop.org/library/heckert:_Anarchism_and_Sexuality)).

is revealed, and this fact must be considered in any queer reading. Thus while desire (I agree) should be understood as a queer category in Bataille, such queerness is frequently figured as a “limited” or “failed” heterosexuality--a conception at once subversive and potentially problematic for l/g/b/t politics. On the one hand, eroticism deconstructs the binarism between men and women, masculinity and femininity and opens upon a queer space of mutable gender and sexual identity. On the other hand, such queerness reveals itself only secondarily as “taboo” limit of heteronormativity, its “other.” As I will later show, in Bataille’s fiction narrative is primarily focalized through straight male narrator, and it is the disruptive effects of his desire specifically for women that yield a queering of identity. Pierre in *Ma mère*, Troppmann in *Bleu du ciel*, or Charles in *L’Abbé C*, for example, commonly report what we might call the “queer” effects of desire (polymorphous perversity, abjection, desubjectivisation, etc.) always in response certain feminine presence: Mother, Dirty, and Eponine respectively. Alternate genders and sexualities--including those of women--are thus primarily figured as the “negative” of straight male desire, even though the straight male becomes himself finally “negated” in death or ecstasy by this desire. The provisional delimitation of heterosexual-masculine desire in Bataille functions as a tentative point of orientation for the subsequent disruptive effects of femininity and, ultimately, queerness. In short, while the former delimits and prohibits, the latter *transgresses*.

As a result, Bataille’s oeuvre only evokes queerness--what Bataille might call a form of *sexual transgression*--in a manner that not only compromises, but indeed recreates heteronormative sexual limits upon which it depends. If (as Bataille states in *L’érotisme*) the transgression both exceeds (*dépasse*) and completes (*complète*) the prohibition--i.e., both defies and reifies it--it would seem that queerness, as a transgressive realm of gender and sex, likewise and simultaneously exceeds and

completes heteronormative prohibitions.<sup>20</sup> Evidence for this claim can be found in Bataille's account of the infamous Gilles de Rais, for example, whose homosexuality Bataille tethers to his legendary violence, intoxication, and sexual excesses.<sup>21</sup> Desire in Bataille does queer sexed and gendered identity, but in contrast to Winnubst argument, it is unclear if this queering is possible other than through a failed, albeit privileged, heteronormative (masculine) desire. If this is the case, queer desire goes unrealized independently of heteronormative law which, to paraphrase Bataille, it both completes and exceeds. This conclusion starkly challenges Winnubst characterization that "to be queer is not to respond to the law of desire: it is to have no idea who or what you are, or where you're going."<sup>22</sup> To the contrary, queerness is a form of transgression in Bataille, and as such, it can never be entirely divorced from the (heteronormative) laws of desire. Yet I think this is not as tragic as Winnubst's account implies; rather, the interaction of transgressive desire and the law enables, however provisionally, a variety of genders and sexualities formed as much by a heteronormative law as by its violation--a phenomenon quintessentially illustrated in the form of sacrifice. It is in this way that a politics *and* ethics of queerness can be elaborated in Bataille.

Zeynep Direk's article from the same volume, "Erotic Experience and Sexual Difference in Bataille," mobilizes an argument in this vein. Inspired by Luce Irigaray's

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<sup>20</sup> Bataille, *L'Erotisme*, 71.

<sup>21</sup> Bataille writes "En fait, dans la formation de Gilles de Rais, les seules éléments qui liassent des traces sont, d'une part la violence guerrière, entraînant...le courage extreme et une rage de bête fauve; enfin une pratique de la boisson dont nous avons vu qu'elle pouvait traditionnellement se lier aux excès sexuels, par exemple à l'homosexualité" (———, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Michel Foucault, vol. 10 [Paris: Gallimard, 1970], 303).

<sup>22</sup> Winnubst, "Bataille's Queer Pleasures: The Universe as Spider or Spit," 91.

efforts to elaborate an ethics of sexual difference,<sup>23</sup> Direk foregrounds the communitarian dimension of sexual difference in Bataille's oeuvre. Drawing specifically upon Bataille's notions of "communication" and "profound subjectivity" in *La part maudite*--which commonly reveal "being" itself, or the inner-limits of subjective existence--presents a porous subject that remains open, or "communicates," to difference in gender and sexuality, making him thus "a thinker of the possibility of sexed communication beyond sexual identities."<sup>24</sup> To wit, Direk explains that erotic experience in Bataille presents access to this profound subjectivity, and thus gendered/sexed difference in its turn. "Bataille speaks of the erotic truth in communication," writes Direk, "which I take to be nothing else than a dangerous openness to the profound subjectivity of our sexed being."<sup>25</sup> Such openness is "dangerous" for imperiling the subject, but it also enables a hospitality toward sexual difference.

Whereas Winnubst sees in such openness the complete dissolution of all sexual subjectivity in a common desirous lack, however, Direk emphasizes the playful queer differences between male and female identity in Bataille, especially in the concept of communication. He remains sensitive to Bataille's heteronormative tendencies and quasi-misogynistic representation of women, without dismissing them *tout court* as a facile sexism. Regarding sexual difference in Bataille, Direk writes:

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<sup>23</sup> See Luce Irigaray, *Ethique de la différence sexuelle*, Collection "Critique" (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1984). Another fruitful comparison of Bataille and Irigaray's ethico-feminist thought can be found in Amy Hollywood, "Divine Woman/Divine Women: The Return of the Sacred in Bataille, Lacan, and Irigaray," in *The Question of Christian Philosophy Today*, ed. Francis J Ambrosio (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999).

<sup>24</sup> Zeynep Direk, "Erotic Experience and Sexual Difference in Bataille," in *Reading Bataille Now*, ed. Shannon Winnubst (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 105.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.



A close reading of his literary works may prove that he was not critical enough of his own sexist prejudices...Is not the subject of [erotic] experience always masculine and virile?...Was not the feminine “a dark continent” for him? In the erotic experiences Bataille narrates, the virility of the “I” is put in question as much as the femininity of the femininity of the specular other. Neither virility nor femininity can be objects of knowledge, for they are contingent, miraculous differences impossible to know or to predict in the immanent experience of communication. Although Bataille does not explicitly contest the heterosexual divide, he is constantly obsessed with creating and sharing queer pleasures.<sup>26</sup>

In other words, sexed differences are aleatory effects of communication, the “miraculous” byproducts of the *queering* communication occasions. Thus while sexed, if not sexist differences proliferate in Bataille’s work, such differences arise from a shared experience of an “unknown” sexual self-identity--what Bataille might call a *non-savoir*--that, for Direk, provides the basis of a communitarian ethics. The ethical bond to others is revealed in self-estrangement to one’s own sexual subjectivity, what one might more simply call “queer communication.” Thus “in a Bataillan discourse, this queerness appears as our own lost strangeness, a longing in our very being,” Direk summarizes, yet “this is not to deny that queerness is constantly created,” but rather that the “creation and return to the self belong to one and the same immanent movement of differences,” providing “a space for the respect for differential manifestation.”<sup>27</sup> In this way, Bataille’s accounts of virility and femininity should be understood as aleatory *analytic* differences, not binary ones--a controversial claim considering Bataille’s frequent heteronormative contrasts. In the section of *L’érotisme* entitled “Les femmes, objets privilégiés du plaisir,” for example, Bataille writes that women “se proposent comme des objets au désir agressif des hommes.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 104-5.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>28</sup> Georges Bataille, *L’érotisme*, 145.

With “queer communication,” Direk’s argument already anticipates a performative conception of sexual identity in Bataille. Ethical openness toward the “creative,” “immanent,” and “miraculous” manifestations of mobile (self-)difference unmask the multiple identities that underly *le moi* of erotic experience. While these conclusions are largely persuasive, however, Direk’s details are largely lacking. For example, it remains quite unclear exactly how the “immanent movement of differences” takes place in Bataille’s writings, or precisely where and how virility and femininity (for example) are commonly “put into question.” In other words, how precisely are sexual identities created--or “un-created”--by Bataille? What gives rise to Direk’s obscure “differential manifestations,” and how, if at all, might one illustrate them? Might it not be possible, for example, to concretely identify different forms of masculinity in Bataille, or indeed different forms of femininity, without implying the stability or exhaustion of such possibilities? Moreover, if all sexual identity in Bataille is tethered to the *same* dynamic space of (self-)differentiation--the same “unity through difference,” so to speak--how are we to make sense of Bataille’s categoric emphasis on *feminine* identity which, for better or worse, serves as the exemplary figure for radical alterity itself, sexed or otherwise? Also, finally, if indeed Bataille’s queer communitarianism depends on *transgressing* the limits of (sexed) subjectivity as Direk convincingly claims, what are the juridico-political consequences of such transgression, insofar as it (to paraphrase Bataille) “transcends and completes” heteronormative interdictions? In brief, is it ever possible in Bataille to think of a queer, communitarian ethics without a certain heteronormative regime, a *politics* of sexual difference?

***Subjectivity and Sacrifice.*** Responses to many of the questions above, as I have suggested above, can be found in clearly distinguishing between the *means and ends* of Bataille’s challenges to subjectivity and the degree to which heteronormative

identities represent *differing degrees* of subjectivity. While critical consensus in queer scholarship on Bataille persuasively defends the undoing of sexed and gendered identity in liminal categories like community, communication, sovereignty, eroticism, etc., these represent only half the story, only one of the consequences of Bataillan critique, those “excessive” *ends* exposed in transgressing the limits of subjectivity. Absent from such accounts however are the *means* through which such transgression is possible and able to be repeated: the law of heteronormativity. In terms of gender, sexed, and sexual identity, heteronormativity limits the type of lovers we see in Bataille’s work: men seek women and women seduce men; men are the virile subjects of erotic experiences and women the objects of erotic desire. And while Bataille’s conceptions of “virility” and “objectivity” themselves commonly pose challenges to subjectivity, subjectivity itself, indeed heteronormative subjectivity, nevertheless remains definitive and unmistakable in both his thought and fiction.<sup>29</sup> However provisionally, however weakly it stands, heteronormativity perdures as the *sine qua non* condition of queerness in Bataille. It is just as important, therefore, to understand the role(s) of heteronormativity in Bataille as it is to understand queerness, for queerness frequently, if not always, depends on a certain heteronormative convention. To the degree that this “rule” in Bataille studies has been the province of feminist scholarship, it therefore is important to consider such scholarship en route to any queer approach. In anticipation of a queer critique, feminist critic Judith Still has written, “Bataille’s texts do not effect a denial of sexual difference, rather they set difference

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<sup>29</sup> “La vie est l’unité virile des éléments qui la composent,” writes Bataille in “L’apprenti sorcier,” and “life” (vie) refers to “l’existence simple et forte, que la servilité fonctionnelle n’a pas encore détruite” (Georges Bataille and Denis Hollier, *Le Collège de sociologie : 1937-1939* [Paris: Gallimard, 1979], 314). In striking parallel, concerning the feminine object of desire, Bataille writes “l’objet du désir est l’univers ou la totalité de l’être” (Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Michel Foucault, vol. 8 [Paris: Gallimard, 1970], 97). Both virility and femininity reveal a similar ontological plenitude that undoes limited states subjectivity and objectivity both.

afloat.”<sup>30</sup>

It is likewise true, however, that such heternormative law reciprocally betrays the transgressive underpinnings that transcend and complete it. Heternormativity in Bataille therefore does *not* describe a single, unified state of sexual subjectivity, but reveals the queerness inherent to the subjective state of heternormativity itself. In this way, the accounts above reveal much about the queer role of desire for Bataille’s sexual subject. In *L’expérience intérieure*, for example, Bataille at once traces and erases the limits of gendered difference with statements like the following:

Je puis saisir moi en larmes, dans l’angoisse (je puis même à perte de vue prolonger mon vertige et ne plus me trouver que dans le désir d’un autre--d’une femme--unique, irremplaçable, mourante, en chaque chose semblable à moi).<sup>31</sup>

Bataille’s grasps his identity (*saisir moi*) in mortal experiences like anguish (*angoisse*), blindness (*perte de vue*), and vertigo (*vertige*); yet such self-discovery (*me trouver*) through self-loss--i.e., *self-sacrifice*--is ultimately *only* possible (*ne...que*) through the desire of another, i.e., the desire of a *woman* (*le désir d’un autre--d’une femme*). At once Bataille posits a difference between (male) selfhood and female otherness while claiming that selfhood itself imbricates Self and Other, man and woman. Otherwise stated, Bataille paradoxically asserts “I am other than who I am,” or more germanely “I am sexed other than my sex,” simultaneously challenging and reproducing heteronormative difference in the self-realization of a queer difference within. Redoubling the queer ambiguity of Self and Other in this declaration of self-discovery is the phrase “désir d’un autre,” which may mean equally Bataille’s desire of another--i.e., desire of women--or another’s desire for him, a *woman’s* desire. In

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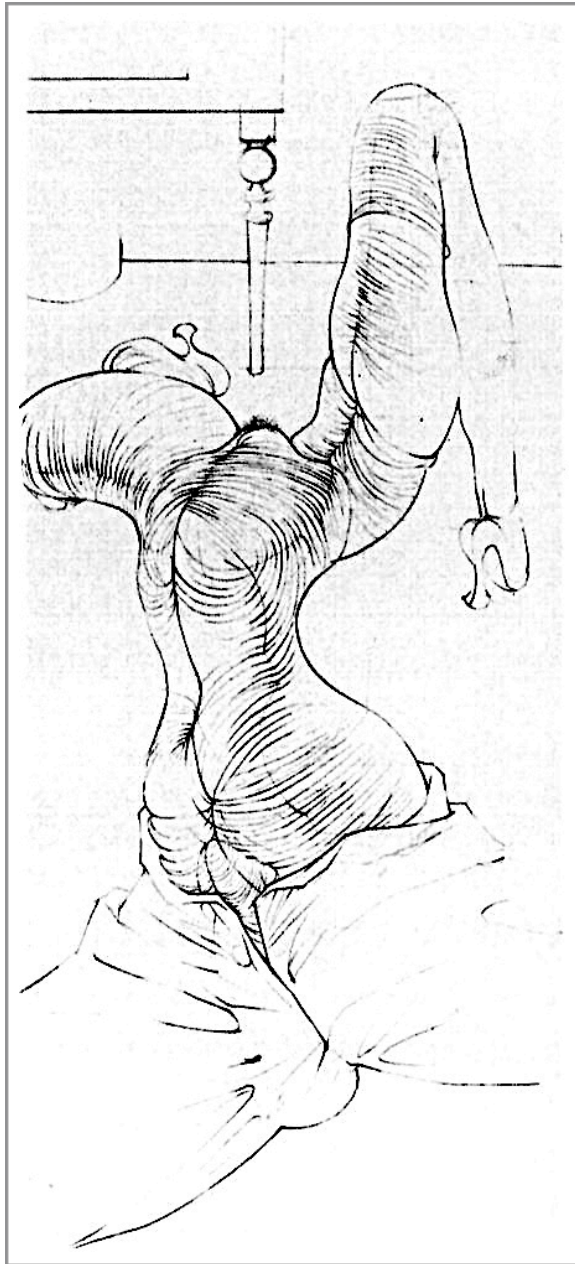
<sup>30</sup> Judith Still, “Horror in Kristeva and Bataille: Sex and Violence,” *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* 20, no. 3 (1997): 230.

<sup>31</sup> Bataille, *L’expérience intérieure*, 85.

this way, just as Bataille's declaration here therefore challenges or queers the boundaries of (male) subjectivity, so does it make possible by implication a desirous *female subject*, another, or an Other, who *herself* desires "him." Thus in the same movement does Bataille subvert and reify heteronormative identity, betraying varying possible degrees of masculinity and femininity within any sexual subject. Hans Bellmer, illustrator for the folio editions of Bataille's early fiction, underscores the undoing of gender boundaries in images like these (**Figure 3.1**).

Given this example, it would seem that there is ultimately no meaningful difference between heteronormativity and queerness in Bataille. The heteronormative becomes queer, the queer heteronormative. Yet close comparison of the representation of men and women, virility and femininity in Bataille do reveal a difference between them, and this difference, in a word, concerns "difference" itself. While Bataille's men and women both desire the other sex, and such desire ultimately undoes male and female identity both, the desire of each provisionally differs in Bataille. This provisional difference not only inheres in differing object choices of desire, whether men or women, but also, and more importantly, in the *degree* to which his men and women desire. And to the extent that (as Winnubst shows) such desire indicates a subjective, inner-lack, a different degree of desire indicates a commensurately different degree of lack--a lack that cedes to (as Direk explains) an "openness" to others and otherness. The degree to which a subject desires others is also therefore the degree to which it is lacking itself, or indeed giving itself away, if not sacrificing itself to others. "L'objet qui provoque le mouvement d'Eros," writes Bataille, "se donne pour autre qu'il n'est."<sup>32</sup> The degree of lack or desire, therefore, would seem inversely

<sup>32</sup> Georges Bataille, *Madame Edwarda. Le mort. Histoire de l'oeil* (Paris: J.J. Pauvert, 1973), 18.



**Figure 2.1.** Hans Bellmer, *Untitled* (Illustration for the folio edition of *Histoire de l'oeil*), 1946. “Ivres et relâchés, Simone et moi nous étions échappés l’un à l’autre, aussitôt élancés à travers la pelouse comme des chiens” (Bataille, Georges. *Madame Edwarda. Le mort. Histoire de l'oeil*, 113).

related to the *degree of subjectivity*. By extension, the desirer's degree of subjectivity is inversely related to his/her *degree of sacrifice*. Subjectivity and sacrifice are thus complementary ways of measuring the same "queer" condition of personal identity in Bataille: *self-differentiation*. As the following analysis shows, Bataille's account of self-sacrifice provides the model by which such self-differentiation should be understood. This model can account for the apparent antinomy between queerness and heteronormativity in Bataille's literature and thought.

***Sacrifice, or Self-Differentiation.*** While the first chapter offers a more thorough evaluation of Bataille's theory of sacrifice (and the debates surrounding it), the following argument merits a brief recapitulation of its main claims as well as reexamination of its implications for gendered identity. Appropriating Marcel Mauss' famed study of sacrifice *Essai sur la nature et fonction of sacrifice*, Bataille understands the ultimate goal of all sacrifice to be pure expropriation of life and subjectivity combined with the transgressive violation of their social safeguards, including reproduction, law, and work. Bataille draws primarily from Mauss' analysis of the sacrifice of the god, in which he claims that "la notion du sacrifice arrive à sa plus haute expression."<sup>33</sup> The sacrifice of the god is to be distinguished from other forms of sacrifice not only because the god is the guarantor of human life, but because the god's sacrifice reveals sacrifice itself to be the very essence of all life, even the god's own. "Non seulement c'est dans le sacrifice que quelque dieux prennent naissance," Mauss writes, "mais encore c'est par le sacrifice que *tous* entretiennent *leur* existence. Il a donc fini par apparaitre comme *leur* essence, *leur* origine, *leur* créateur."<sup>34</sup> Sacrifice reveals life to be an essence common to man and the divine. Sacrifice *to* the god is also therefore a sacrifice *of* the god; the life given is the very

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<sup>33</sup> Marcel Mauss and Viktor Karady, *Oeuvres, vol. I: Les fonctions sociales du sacré* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1968), 283.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 299. Emphasis mine.

same life that is taken. “En somme, on offrait le dieu à lui-meme...la notion du sacrifice au dieu s’est développé parallèlement à celle du sacrifice du dieu.”<sup>35</sup> Thus Mauss’ insistence on the identification of the executioner and victim in sacrifice; thus “la mort de Dieu est souvent un suicide.”<sup>36</sup> Sacrifice is the sacrifice of life to the same life, of life for the same life, revealing all sacrifice to be, in the end, inherently *self-sacrificial*.

Given that sacrifice is paradoxically the *conditio sine qua non* of life and survival in the account above, sacrifice both precedes and exceeds God as the guarantor of all both life human and divine, which comes at the cost of life’s own deadly donation. Thus for Bataille does the proverbial death of God, with all its Nietzschean implications, come to overturn the dualisms between life and death, God and man, and--perhaps most significantly--selfhood and otherness. Citing Mauss in his essay “La mutilation sacrificielle et l’oreille coupée de Vincent Van Gogh,” for example, Bataille explains that sacrifice “rompre l’homogénéité habituelle de la personne” and thus allows access to the “heterogeneous,” divine alterity that personhood habitually hides. In essence, personal identity itself is sacrificed such that the original identity of selfhood and otherness, mortality and divinity are revealed in the same manner as Mauss’ executioner and victim, who commonly “go beyond themselves” (*hors de soi*). “Le sacrifiant est libre--libre de se laisser aller lui-même à un tel dégoût, libre, s’identifiant continuellement à la victime...c’est à dire libre de se jeter tout à coup *hors de soi* comme un galle ou un aïssaouah.”<sup>37</sup> Like the god’s sacrifice of himself to himself, so does the identity of execution and victim arise and

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 297.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 290. Concerning the identification between executioner and victim, Mauss writes “pour que le sacrifice du dieu soit possible...ce n’est pas assez que le dieu soit sorti de la victime: il faut qu’il ait encore toute sa nature divine au moment où il rentre dans le sacrifice pour devenir victime lui-même” (Ibid., 287).

<sup>37</sup> Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, 269-70. A “galle” in this context refers to a priest of Cybele and Attis; the Aïssaouah (*aïssaouah*) is a Sufi brotherhood founded in Morocco circa 1500.



dissolve--arise *through* dissolution--in the ecstatic liberation of sacrifice. At once one and many, singular and multiple, sacrifice “ununifies” all possible lives in death. Thus in his essay “Sacrifices,” Bataille evokes the coincidence of divinity, mortality, life, death, identity, and alterity achieved through sacrifice, their common condition:

Lorsque l’homme-dieu apparaît et meurt à la fois comme pourriture et comme rédemption de la personne suprême, révélant que la vie ne répondra à l’avidité qu’à la condition d’être vécue sur le mode du moi qui meurt, il élude cependant l’impératif pur de ce *moi*: il le soumet à l’impératif appliqué (moral) de Dieu, et, par là, donne le moi comme existence *pour autrui*, pour Dieu...<sup>38</sup>

As the passage suggests, sacrifice overturns the customary conditions under which self-identity (*moi*) is traditionally understood. Far from an amalgam of attributes that presumably comprise an essence, sacrifice reveals the prior dependence of “living identity” on the negativity of death and divine alterity; sacrifice both ruins (*pourriture*) and redeems (*rédemption*) the identity of the “man-god” (*l’homme-dieu*), who is manifested and dies at the same time (*à la fois*). The life of this being, its “lived-being” (*être vécue*) is conditioned upon its death, which is the more fundamental “mode” of selfhood (*le mode du moi qui meurt*) than the one that follows imperative of being a living self “pure and simple” (*l’impératif pur de ce moi*), a self that would deny or avoid death. Instead, through death, sacrifice makes a gift of selfhood (*donne le moi*) to a communal otherness, indeed a *divine* otherness (*existence pour autrui, pour Dieu*).

This is, of course, the “groundless ground” so to speak, upon which Bataille ethics of community and communication are based.<sup>39</sup> This form of ethics is not

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<sup>38</sup> Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Michel Foucault, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 92-3.

<sup>39</sup> See Chapter One for further details on Bataille’s conception of community and its reception in French thought, especially in the work of Jean Luc Nancy.

“known,” but rather “unknown” as an affective form of what he calls “non-knowledge” (*non-savoir*), acquired through the experience of a communal self-loss in sacrifice. True recognition of others rests not in the head but in the heart, in the primordial ground of anguish and death not thought, but felt. Of communication, “il ne suffit pas de reconnaître, cela ne met encore en jeu que l’esprit,” writes Bataille; “il faut aussi que la reconnaissance ait lieu dans le coeur...ce n’est plus la philosophie, mais le sacrifice (la communication).”<sup>40</sup> Such a form of sacrifice conjoins not only executioner and victim as per Mauss’ claim, but all identities, insofar as they commonly experience the death common to all and particular to no one, making it a “sacrifice où tout est victime.”<sup>41</sup>

Not only therefore is all sacrifice ultimately a form of self-sacrifice--indeed the sacrifice of selfhood itself--but the progress of self-sacrifice seems to follow a dialectical structure wherein two become simultaneously one and none: victim, executioner, life, death, self, other. Yet, as I have already suggested in the first chapter, this structure evokes a negative dialectics wherein the “reconciliation” of one and none is retained in an indeterminate, “plural unity.” This dialectics is very roughly schematized in his renown 1955 essay “Hegel, mort, et le sacrifice.” This essay, his effort to “recommence et défait la phénoménologie de Hegel,” offers an analysis of sacrifice in ways atypical for Bataille, insofar as it is interrogated expressly within a

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<sup>40</sup> Bataille, *L'expérience intérieure*, 65.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

dialectical framework.<sup>42</sup> While sacrificial death for Bataille ultimately represents the subversive unworking of all dialectical thought, such unworking is not accomplished itself without another kind of “work” that Jean-Luc Nancy has appropriately called *désœuvrement*. This “work of unworking,” as it were, describes Bataille’s mode of praxis with no product, one that (suggesting Hegel) “consummates in nothing” (*la consummation en RIEN*).<sup>43</sup> Yet Nancy’s famed analysis demands some qualification: the “active negation” of this so-called unworking *also* evinces an infinite series of *potential* works or *potential* products that the normative, singular synthesis (*Aufhebung*) of dialectical thought eliminates. The process of unworking “unproduces,” so to speak, a multiplicity of provisional results. This “work of potential,” elided in dialectics, itself assumes a dialectical form, albeit an unproductive one. As already seen in the essay “Sacrifices,” sacrifice for Bataille evinces a kind of synthesis that is never “one” and always “potentially” other: it effects the union of the executioner and victim, man and God, self and other; the man-god both appears and dies (*apparaît, meurt*), is both ruined and redeemed (*pourriture, rédemption*). On the one hand, sacrifice realizes human transcendence, apotheosis, and communal existence (*pour autrui, pour Dieu*); on the other, it achieves this precisely through “un-realization” in death. Whereas Hegelian dialectics produces a unified synthesis over

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<sup>42</sup> Asger Sorensen takes the unorthodox position that Bataille is rigorously dialectical thinker in his article “The Inner-Experience of Living Matter: Bataille and Dialectics.” Bataille’s concepts of non-knowledge and inner-experience, for him, represent “determinate negations” of Hegel’s thinking in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. While I would agree that Bataille’s thinking is dialectical, it is far from determinate insofar as death and negativity in Bataille are always quite indeterminate notions. See Asger Sorensen, “The Inner Experience of Living Matter: Bataille and Dialectics,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 33, no. 5 (2007). James Creech offers a compelling analysis of this indeterminacy in his essay “Julia Kristeva’s Bataille,” wherein he argues that Kristeva reads Bataille as a Hegelian, in a manner similar to Sorensen (James Creech, “Julia Kristeva’s Bataille: Reading as Triumph,” *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism* 5, no. 1 [1975]).

<sup>43</sup> As already discussed in the first chapter, *désœuvrement* for Nancy (as for Blanchot) is the paradigm of Bataille’s community, a “community with nothing in common” (*rien en commun*). “La communauté a nécessairement lieu dans ce que Blanchot a nommé le désœuvrement” he explains; “En deca ou au-delà de l’oeuvre, cela qui se retire de l’oeuvre, cela qui n’a plus à faire ni avec la production ni avec l’achèvement, mais qui rencontre l’interruption, la fragmentation, le suspens” (Jean-Luc Nancy, *La communauté desouvrée* [Paris: C. Bourgois, 1986], 79).

and against the negativity of death, Bataille's dialectics preserves such negativity within dialectical synthesis itself.

In "Hegel, mort, et sacrifice," Bataille explains that sacrifice accedes to the "truth of humanity" (in the Hegelian sense of *Wahrheit*) by foregrounding death, that which both begins and animates the dialectic itself. "Du sacrifice," Bataille writes, "je puis dire essentiellement, sur le plan de la philosophie de Hegel, qu'en un sens, l'Homme a révélé et fondé la vérité humaine en sacrifiant."<sup>44</sup> The difference between Hegel and Bataille--which is also, I would argue, the difference between Hegelian dialectics and Bataille's negative dialectics--is this: whereas Hegel's *Aufhebung* is teleological, singular, and unified, Bataille's is radically infinite, multiple, and bivalent. Bataille critiques Hegel's rational effort to conciliate identity with otherness, the living subject with death, by highlighting the insistence of dialectical negativity, i.e., "the work of potential." In a phrase, the work of potential might more simply be called the performativity of sacrifice, as I have argued in the first chapter. "En vérité" writes Bataille, "le problème de Hegel est donné dans *l'action du sacrifice*. Dans le sacrifice, la mort, d'une part, frappe essentiellement l'être corporel; et c'est, d'autre part, dans le sacrifice, qu'exactement, 'la mort vit une vie humaine'."<sup>45</sup> "Death living

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<sup>44</sup> Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 12, 335.

<sup>45</sup> Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Michel Foucault, vol. 12 (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 335. Emphasis mine. It is worthy to note that, to the extent that Bataille's work exhibits a what I call a negative dialectics, it should not be entirely conflated with Adorno's famous model in *Negative Dialectics*. Bataille, like Adorno, certainly rejects German Idealism and similarly insists on the importance of the "non-conceptual" and "non-identity thinking," especially as they loom (as Adorno says) "under the aspect of identity." The body represents for both an unthinkable limit that cannot be exhausted by reason or dialectical consciousness; it is rigidly non-conceptual. Nevertheless, the understanding and importance of religion differs radically for these figures. Also different, albeit less evident, are their evaluations of suffering. Whereas Adorno seeks to alleviate suffering by showing how "identity-thinking" either causes or ignores suffering, even causes it *without* knowing it (especially in the case of the Holocaust), Bataille often valorizes suffering as a "virile" or quasi-mythic struggle to achieve the sacred, inner-experience, etc. Their respective accounts of the Holocaust are instructive for highlighting their differences on the problem of suffering more generally. For more on this issue, see Paul Hegarty, "Bataille, Agamben, and the Holocaust," *Other Voices: A Journal of Critical Thought* 2, no. 2 (2002); Theodor W. Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, *Can One Live after Auschwitz? : A Philosophical Reader*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003); and, of course, Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1983).

a human life"--an expression borrowed from Kojève--constitutes humanity at the threshold between life and death, indeed the very threshold exposed in and by sacrifice itself. In sacrifice, human life dies--but this is hardly different from the "lived death" of mortal existence. The simultaneous potential to live or die--indeed live through death or die through life--is the precarious "human" synthesis that a man must recognize to achieve true human self-consciousness. A man's "propre négativité le tuera," writes Bataille, "mais pour lui, désormais, rien ne sera plus: sa mort est créatrice, mais si la conscience de la mort...ne le touche pas avant qu'il meure, il en sera pour lui...comme si la mort ne devait pas l'atteindre, et cette mort à venir ne pourra lui donner un caractère *humain*."<sup>46</sup> In a sacrificial death, the destruction of man is also the (re-)creation (*créatrice*) of humanity, (re-)transforming the identity of a single man into the mortal (w)hole that, "unconsciously," he already was.

The human is thus (un)synthesized as a disunity or dichotomy, lying in, at, or on the threshold between potential law and lawlessness, ruination and redemption, death and resurrection.<sup>47</sup> Recognition of this threshold--a threshold reached quintessentially in sacrifice--is the endless result of the human dialectic of self-consciousness. Bataille's negative dialectics therefore ends with realization of the endless potential for life *or* death that is humanity. Sacrifice is this realization *par excellence*. As such, humanity is forever divided and infinitely multiple; it is the life that dies, the death that lives. For humanity, therefore, life is not the opposite of death but rather an performance of human existence as a potential death or a potential life, indeed as potential *lives*: victim and executioner, God and man. In this way, humanity

<sup>46</sup> Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 12, 337.

<sup>47</sup> Emblematic of this paradox is Bataille's distinction between the "self-who-lives" (*moi-qui-vit*) and "self-who-dies" (*moi-qui-meurt*) articulated in *L'expérience intérieure*: "Tant que je vis, je me contente d'un va-et-vient, d'un compromis...je prends part à ce qui, de toute nécessité, existe, à ce que rien ne peut retirer. Le moi-qui-meurt abandonne cet accord: lui, véritablement, aperçoit ce qui l'entoure comme un vide et soi-même comme un défi à cette vide" (———, *L'expérience intérieure*, 85-6). As such, Bataille's "self" occupies both sides of a sacrificial divide in a manner analogous to women, revealing a common queer space of self-identity.

is a role-play masking the chimerical potential of “life-death” realized at the threshold of sacrifice, the “divided-unity” transiently recognized and synthesized in the human.

This analysis sheds light on the significance of aesthetic representation in the essay. Bataille himself insists on the significance of subterfuge and spectacle in the human recognition of death. To recognize death in life requires representation analogous to drama, especially in the form of tragedy. Realization of death, he writes, “annonce la nécessité du spectacle, ou généralement de la représentation...Il s’agit, du moins dans la tragédie, de nous identifier à quelque personnage qui meurt, et de croire mourir alors que nous sommes en vie.”<sup>48</sup> In terms of sacrifice, Bataille’s allusion is suggestive. In a manner analogous to Bataille’s executioner and scapegoat, the Aristotelian identification with the tragic hero--who’s sacrifice purifies the polis---induces a parallel purgation in the spectator in the form of catharsis. As Aristotle tells us, however, catharsis is not unique to the spectator since it is shared by the tragic hero himself, and the hero’s catharsis couples itself with *anagnorisis* or “recognition” of the truth, or the hero’s awareness of himself. When Oedipus learns of his incest and patricide, the Oedipus he “truly” is, he loses his father, his wife, his sight, and his rule. Through his tragic loss, he learns his true fate and becomes truly self-conscious; indeed loss *is* his self-consciousness, the sacrificial means through which he becomes himself through a certain self-loss. For Bataille, Oedipus reflects the state of humanity itself, which must similarly “lose itself” to achieve the self-consciousness of mortal being. Tragic drama thus represents the drama of self-consciousness, so to speak, the theatrical discovery of human identity acquired specifically through self-sacrificial loss. In Bataille’s tragic theatre of sacrifice, therefore, human actor and audience, like the executioner and victim, recognize a shared human truth at the moment of sacrificial loss, namely that to identify oneself as “human” means to wear the mask of

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<sup>48</sup> Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 12, 337.

tragedy. For Bataille, human identity represents a form of tragic performance “staged,” as it were, on the altar of self-sacrifice.

This performance of human identity conceived as sacrificial loss would presumably subvert all subdivisions of human identity, including those that pertain to gender and sex. As seen in his essay on Hegel, humanity, life, and death are represented as neutered universals belonging indifferently to both men and women. Yet, as we see above, “humanity” as such is hardly universal at all; as a product of self-sacrifice, it already implies a multiplicity of tragic masks worn in the play of personal identity. As particular forms of personal identity, gendered and sexed identity are likewise multiple, one might also say *queered*, at the threshold of self-sacrifice. The threshold of sacrifice, the bivalent divide it creates between life and death, is kin to the the threshold at which genders are also created and undone repeatedly. In this way, one might imagine a spectrum of differing males and females, masculinities and femininities, that the law of heteronormativity both constrains and enables. Given that heteronormativity and queerness commonly exist in Bataille, they should be understood as representing opposing sides of the subject’s (self-)sacrificial self-differentiation: whereas queerness would characterize the side of sacrificial negativity, death, tragedy, and transgression, heteronormativity characterizes the side of sexual subjectivity, life, and the law. Sacrificial self-differentiation is sexual self-differentiation; the bivalence of sacrifice at the limit between life and death, law and lawlessness, embodies the bivalence of personal identity itself. The degree to which a subject is queered is the degree to which it is sacrificed; the degree to which it opposes self-sacrifice, conversely, is the degree to which it is a subject that abides (heteronormative) law.

***Different Differences.*** These different degrees enable us to explain the apparent antinomy of heteronormativity and queerness in Bataille’s work. It is indeed

possible to defend his heteronormative, sexist tendencies and their subversion. In Bataille, I would argue that men and women *provisionally* differ in their degrees of self-sacrifice, and thus also in their respective degrees of subjectivity, along a continuous spectrum of genders, sexes, and sexualities. Insofar as men and women provisionally differ in these respective degrees, they likewise provisionally differ in their degree of queerness. These differences, as I show below, also provisionally structure the heteronormativity between men and women. If self-sacrifice itself describes an erotic, religious, and ethical mode of self-differentiation as described above, heteronormative difference should be understood as provisionally *different degrees of sacrificial self-differentiation*. In other words, sexed and gendered differences are provisional differences in degrees--not kinds--of subjectivity and self-sacrifice. Whereas Bataille's men and masculinity provisionally err on the defensive side of subjectivity, experience, and thought, women provisionally tend toward self-sacrifice unto the divine limit of complete otherness, abjection, openness, and absence. As Bataille famously writes in *Madame Edwarda*, "Dieu, néanmoins, est une fille publique, en tout pareille *aux autres*...Dieu n'est rien s'il n'est pas *dépassement* de Dieu dans tous les sens;...à la fin dans le sens de *rien*."<sup>49</sup> God, others, eroticism and nothingness are provisionally feminine things, whereas the subjective experience of these are characteristically masculine. Counterpoised against the "ravishing" (*ravissante*) Edwarda (*L. rapere*, "to seize," "to take away"), for example, the narrator reflects upon her absence: "je tremblais, devinant devant moi ce que le monde a de plus désert."<sup>50</sup>

Besides explaining the prevalence of heteronormativity in Bataille, these differing degrees of self-difference explain the controversial exemplarity of women as

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<sup>49</sup> Bataille, *Madame Edwarda. Le mort. Histoire de l'oeil*, 17. Emphasis mine.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.



well. The gender divide seems intimately related to a divide *provisionally particular* to women before or beyond men and their desires. In Bataille, women always traverse the sacrificial threshold between life and death with a facility foreign to men, making them figuratively (dis-)embody the bivalence characteristic of sacrifice itself. In a short essay, Phillippe Sollers notes that Bataille's women signify

the compromise that humanity establishes between prohibition and transgression, a compromise which, through marriage, is transpierced by the possibility of erotic violence; not only does she assume the role of (pure) mother and (impure) animal, of respect and the violation of respect (of "sexual frenzy" and childcare), but she lends her consistency to a structure of exclusion within which a resistant milieu--a stage (scene)--may be constituted in terms of its potential reversal.<sup>51</sup>

The "compromise" between prohibition and transgression, pure and impure, violation and respect Sollers describes recalls the dialectics of sacrifice described above. In short, women *are* the compromise, the threshold between taboo and transgression, identity and alterity, life and death. In this way, women (provisionally, I would add) exhibit a greater degree of self-difference and self-sacrifice than men or masculine identity, so to speak, and thus a lesser degree of subjectivity; yet once this is recognized or experienced by men, they too cross the same sacrificial divide provisionally proper to women such that, in the end, self-sacrificial difference queers all gender difference. This result is especially apparent in Bataille's erotic fiction. If queering is the effect of sacrifice on gender however, and women seem linked more intimately to sacrifice, it would seem in consequence that women and feminine identity are provisionally "queerer" than men and masculine identity--even though such queerness ultimately obscures the heteronormative difference that gives rise to femininity (and masculinity) itself. In other words, women exemplify sacrifice insofar

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<sup>51</sup> Philippe Sollers, "The Roof: Essay in Systematic Reading," in *Bataille : A Critical Reader*, ed. Fred Botting (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998), 89.

as they are the primary provisional gender that “ungenders” itself, that *queers* itself, and becomes the gender it “is not.” Becoming so compels the desire of men--i.e., the desire that compels an analogous inner-lack and openness--setting them along the path of self-sacrifice, which queers them in turn. With both genders commonly lost in erotic self-sacrifice, they “unwork” (in Nancy’s parlance) all heteronormative difference, yielding to a queer, shared sacrificial self-differentiation.

It is remarkable to note how often Bataille’s construction of sexual difference advances a notion that itself deconstructs the sexual difference upon which it is based. In his famous essay “L’apprenti sorcier,” for example, Bataille promotes the quality of “virility” (L. *vir*, “man”) in the pursuits of myth, art, eroticism, and secret societies, since all express a form of *amor fati* that heroically embraces mortality. To be sure, Bataille takes his cue from other intellectuals of the period such as André Malraux, who in novels like *Le Temps du mépris* (1935) and *L’espoir* (1937) extols a “fraternité virile” in which individualism is challenged through communal rebellious action, including self-sacrificial death. For Bataille, the virile challenge to individualism takes place in transcending the material conditions of life that hide the presence of love, myth, and human destiny, those more mortal things that give life meaning. In “L’apprenti sorcier,” Bataille writes:

L’homme à qui la destinée humaine fait peur, et qui ne peut pas supporter l’enchaînement de l’avidité, des crimes et des misères, ne peut pas non plus être viril...ceux qui dominent alors l’existence sont presque toujours ceux qui savent le mieux se mentir à eux-mêmes...la virilité décline, dans ces conditions, autant que l’amour de la destinée humaine.<sup>52</sup>

In addition, he writes:

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<sup>52</sup> Georges Bataille and Denis Hollier, *Le Collège de sociologie : 1937-1939* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), 306-7.

La virilité n'est rien de moins que l'expression de ce principe: quand un homme n'a plus la force de répondre à l'image de la nudité désirable, il reconnaît la perte de son intégrité virile. Et de même que la virilité se lie à toute image qui suscite de l'espoir et de l'effroi.<sup>53</sup>

In short, virility is wed to those avid (*l'avidité*) experiences of fear (*peur*) and hope (*espoir*), crime and misery (*des crimes et des misères*), that compel a man (*homme*) to transcend individualism through destiny. As for Malraux, Bataille conceives virility to be a fearless confrontation against oppressive forces (*ceux qui dominent*), one that not only righteously rebels against such oppression but exposes a greater human "truth." This truth, as Bataille later explains, is nothing other than death itself, the ultimate mortal human condition: "La destinée d'un homme ne devient pas réelle à la seule condition qu'il combatte. Il faut encore que cette destinée se confonde avec celle des forces dans les rangs desquelles il affronte la mort."<sup>54</sup> As such, virility describes nothing other than a man's heroic self-sacrifice in the battle against individualism, a sacrifice wherein "tout est victime."

Yet this man, presumably emblematic of a universal humanity, is nevertheless later quite intimately wed to heterosexual masculinity, shifting the universal meaning of man (*homme*) to manliness. The most prominent illustration of this shift is found in sections IX-XII of the essay, in which he talks about the relationship between the lover and beloved. The male lover confronts the beloved woman in a manner analogous to death and destiny. "La femme vers laquelle un homme est porté comme à la destinée humaine incarnée pour lui n'appartienne plus à l'espace dont l'argent dispose. Sa douceur échappe au monde réel où elle passe sans se laisser enfermer plus qu'un rêve."<sup>55</sup> If the man "faces" destiny, the woman "incarnates" it, yet not in a manner that

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 314.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 312.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 316.

would enclose her within the living “real world” the lover tries to heroically overcome. Instead she represents a dreamy portal to destiny, a gateway between the real and transcendent, thingness and nothingness, life and death, much like the one sought in sacrifice. Staring at the woman is not enough for the man to capture his destiny and achieve true virility, however; this remains only “une émotion esthétique” without the “volonté de la posséder et de rendre vrai ce que son apparition avait semble signifier.” It is only when the feminine figure of fate is “conquise, ou perdue” that the “l’image fugitive du destin,” becomes realized, and “cesse d’être une figure aléatoire pour devenir la réalité arrêtant le sort.”<sup>56</sup> The fulfillment of the *man’s* virility lies in conquering or losing the woman, whereby she becomes the reality of *human* destiny--i.e., *his own* destiny.

As Bataille explains later, this erotic pursuit is analogous to transgressing the limit that demarcates the profane from the sacred, making it tantamount to a form of self-sacrifice: “dans le domaine ou il s’avance, n’est pas moins nécessaire a ses étranges démarches qu’il ne l’est aux transports de l’érotisme (le monde total du mythe, monde de l’être, est séparé...par les limites mêmes qui séparent le sacré du profane).”<sup>57</sup> On the one hand, therefore, virility is a condition seemingly particular to the masculine subject and his (heterosexual) desire; he is the one who loves, fights, dies, and self-sacrificially embraces destiny through eroticism. On the other hand, however, virility goes unrealized *without* capturing the feminine, which exemplarily provides a gateway to this destiny. While it represents the “human” fulfillment of the heterosexual male subject (through its divestiture in sacrifice), virility is possible only on the condition of a femininity to be “conquered” (*conquise*) or “lost” (*perdue*). Yet these alternatives are themselves significant, insofar as they describe the *same*

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 318.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 325-6.

sacrificial result of “realizing the unrealization,” so to speak, of the masculine subject, identity, and self-consciousness. A man does not accomplish his virile destiny without the presence of a woman, yet this presence must be both appropriated (conquered) and expropriated (lost) by the man himself. In other words, the presence of virility is conditioned on feminine *absence*. In both conquest and loss, appropriation or expropriation, the feminine confronts the masculine only *in absentia*, in its turn absenting the masculine subject in its virile quest for destiny and death.

Therefore, if woman is understood as an absence in Bataille, so is therefore, ultimately a virile man. “La virilité,” Bataille writes, “n’est rien de moins que l’expression de ce principe: quand un homme n’a plus la force de répondre à l’image de la nudité désirable, il reconnaît la perte de son intégrité virile. Et de même que la virilité se lie à l’attrait d’un corps nu.”<sup>58</sup> The man’s virile attraction to the woman’s nude body (*attrait d’un corps nu*), his desire to “appropriate” her, so to speak, ultimately leads also to the expropriation of this constitutive virility in self-loss (*la perte de son intégrité*). Several questions thus arise: does this obligatory expropriation/appropriation of the feminine subsume femininity under a virile manhood, or does it rather *feminize* this virility in some way, such that human destiny would go unrealized without the woman, without femininity? Is not this “unmanliness” tainted with femininity? As the above demonstrates, the man’s self-sacrifice *for* virility is also, in some way, the self-sacrifice *of* virility itself. Being a man necessarily implies also not being a man, the loss of manhood, a type of “loss” always akin to feminine absence. The virile man seeks out femininity as the fulfillment of his destiny, and yet such a destiny seems queer, neither--and yet both--masculine and feminine.

An analogous moment occurs in *La part maudite*, where Bataille advances his epistemological notion of *non-savoir*, to which he elsewhere tethers the notion of

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 314.

sacrifice: “le sacrifice est la folie, la renonciation à tout savoir.”<sup>59</sup> *Non-savoir*, in brief, concerns the knowledge of nothingness, negativity, sacrifice, and ecstasy, which is to be distinguished from a more determinative or “positive” knowledge, indeed what Hegel might have called “Absolute Knowing” (*das absolute Wissen*) in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel’s epistemology sheds light on Bataille’s more indeterminate *non-savoir*, insofar as Hegel too links knowledge to self-sacrifice. Comparison of their respective epistemologies might further illustrate the difference between the dialectical models above described. In the final section of the *Phenomenology*, where Hegel delineates how Spirit becomes self-aware, he writes that the “self-knowing Spirit knows not only itself but also the negative of itself, or its limit: to know one’s limit is to know how to sacrifice oneself. This sacrifice (*Aufopferung*) is the externalization in which Spirit displays the process of its becoming Spirit.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, Spirit becomes self-aware through a “self-sacrificial” externalization--i.e., a *self-differentiation*--that permits it to recognize itself *qua* Other which, once recognized, reconciles Spirit for-itself and in-itself into self-conscious Absolute Spirit, Spirit that knows itself “absolutely.” Thus is Absolute Knowledge positive, productive, determinative; it *identifies* the Absolute to itself, realizing thus, in its turn, Absolute Spirit.

In this way, *non-savoir* for Bataille represents the very inversion of Hegelian epistemology, especially in the form of self-sacrifice and the sacred. “Dieu est un effet du non-savoir. Mais toujours est-il que, comme effet du non-savoir, il est connaissable, comme le rire, comme le sacré.”<sup>61</sup> Such inversion is implied in an obliquely Hegelian

<sup>59</sup> Bataille, *L'expérience intérieure*, 66.

<sup>60</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Arnold V. Miller, and J. N. Findlay, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 492. In German: “Das Wissen kennt nicht nur sich, sondern auch das Negative seiner selbst, oder seine Grenze. Seine Grenze wissen heißt sich aufzuopfern wissen. Diese Aufopferung ist die Entäußerung, in welcher der Geist sein Werden zum Geiste...sein reines *Selbst*...und ebenso sein *Sein* als Raum anschauend.”

<sup>61</sup> Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 8, 229.

statement written in *L'expérience intérieure*: “quand l’extreme du savoir est là (et l’extreme du savoir que je viens d’entendre est l’au-delà du savoir absolu), il en est de même que dans le savoir absolu, tout se renverse.”<sup>62</sup> Non-knowledge rests outside (*au-delà*) the limits of the knowledge; yet if Absolute Knowledge, as Hegel seems to suggest, represents the sure knowledge of knowledge itself, the self-identity of knowledge, it would seem likewise that *non-savoir*, as the extremity (*l’extreme du savoir*) and inversion (*se renverse*) of absolute knowledge (*savoir absolu*) is, in a phrase, *the absolution of absolute knowledge*, in the strong sense of the Latin *absolvere* (“to set free,” “to make separate”). The inner-separation of knowledge from itself, which might be likened to the sacrificial self-differentiation described above, represents the rending not only of knowledge, but also the dialectical self-identification upon which it depends. If knowledge implies self-identity, therefore, *non-savoir* implies self-differentiation. *Non-savoir* represents not, therefore, “ignorance” or the opposite of knowledge, but rather the very self-differentiation upon which knowledge itself depends.

In his essay “Les conséquences du non-savoir,” Bataille elaborates this epistemology along gendered lines. Women in particular occasion an epistemic break that treads along the path of *non-savoir*:

Si l’on est en face d’une femme, tant qu’on la connaît, on la connaît mal, c’est à dire qu’on en a une “connaissance qui touche au savoir.” Dans la mesure où l’on cherche à connaître psychologiquement une femme sans se laisser emporter par la passion, on s’éloigne d’elle. C’est seulement lorsqu’on cherche à la connaître par rapport à la mort qu’on se rapproche d’elle.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Bataille, *L'expérience intérieure*, 66.

<sup>63</sup> Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 8, 195.

To know a woman, in other words, *is not* to know her and ultimately to “know” nothingness itself; *non-savoir* is the only “knowledge” possible of a woman, and this knowledge implies self-sacrificial (*se laisser emporter*) eroticism and death (*passion, la mort*). By extension, Bataille implies that *savoir* is ordinarily, by contrast, the province of men. Simply stated, *savoir* is man and *non-savoir* is woman. However, *non-savoir*, as explained above, is not binaristically opposed to knowledge or knowing, however, but rather, it suggests the impasse of knowledge, the knowledge of not knowing, the acknowledgement of the unacknowledgable. Just as the self-identity of knowledge upset in its rapprochement with non-knowledge, so too here masculine identity in its relation to the feminine, which remains somehow “unidentifiable.” Thus the feminine does not oppose knowledge or the knowing masculine subject in Bataille; nor does it oppose this opposition, however, since such an opposition would rationally constitute two distinct dialectical categories—and thus together an absolute, positive form of knowledge. As such, the heteronormative categories of “masculine” and “feminine” constitute a rational distinction, and therefore another form of *savoir*. *Non-savoir*, however, denies such distinctions while denying such denials, insofar as it “résulte de toute proposition lorsqu’on cherche à aller au fond de son contenu, et qu’on est gêné.”<sup>64</sup> The “end” (*fond*) of knowing oneself as a man is no different than that of knowing a woman, since both ends are the at the singular end of knowledge itself. For this reason, *non-savoir*, though provisionally feminine, ultimately reveals itself to be queer—(n)either masculine (n)or feminine—subverting the provisional heterosexism of Bataille’s epistemology.

***Sexual Fictions.*** Literary analogs to the theoretical models above can be found throughout Bataille’s oeuvre. The feminine as pure desire and lack provides the transgressive portal to eroticism, death, and the sacred that the solitary man, “lacking

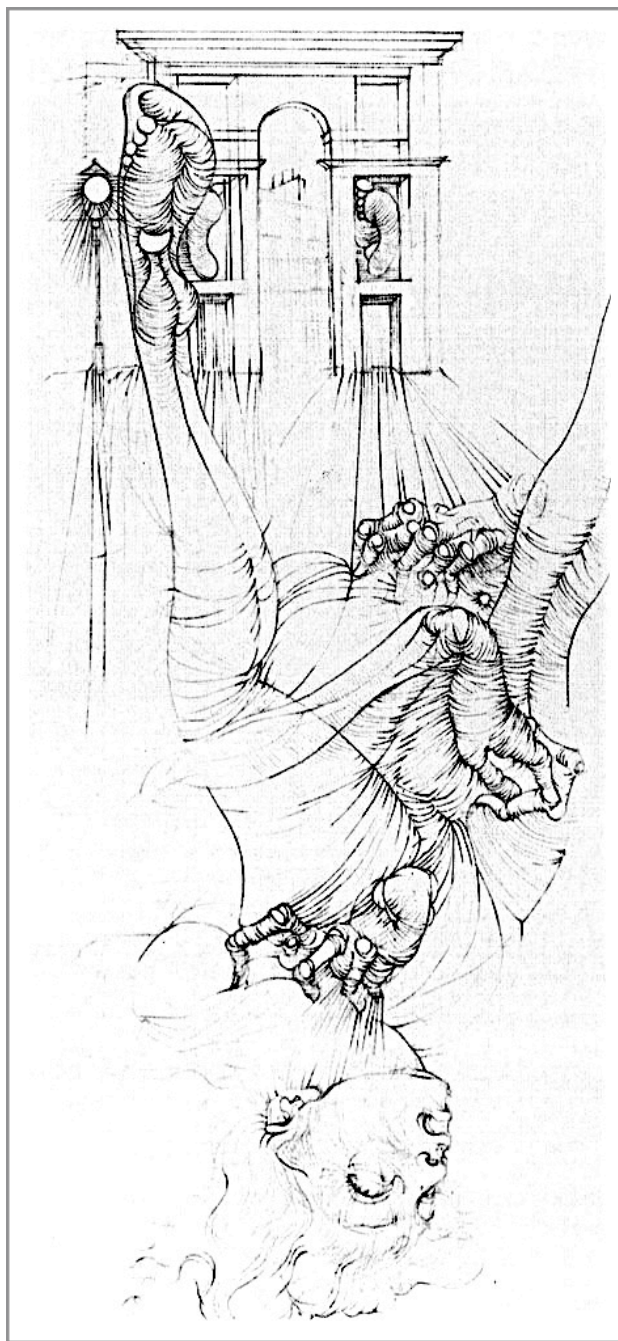
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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 191.



the lack” of woman, conquers and loses. Bataille’s feminine characters (and characterization of the feminine) initially offer privileged access to this otherworldly space where subjectivity is lost and the sacred is found in self-sacrifice. The figures of presence and absence as a result mark gendered difference in Bataille; whereas men are present, women are frequently absent, if not absence itself figured in the form of death. Male characters approach the feminine as they approach death, a death that seems to fulfill their prior “human” fate while apparently feminizing their male character. In *Madame Edwarda*, for example, a nameless and impotent male narrator enters a brothel in Paris in search of a *fille publique* and finds the mysterious Edwarda, whom he approaches with (sacred) ambivalent feelings of fear and wonder, as she is God (*Je suis Dieu*). These sentiments are no less equivocal than Edwarda herself, who, he explains, constantly disappears and is yet always “sensibly absent” (*sensiblement absent*). Though he desirously follows her through the night, he cannot broach her without sensing his own absence and self-loss, which he morbidly describes as a “shattering” (*se briser*), “sickness” (*être malade*) and “decomposition” (*décomposer*). Edwarda is essentially constituted, or de-constituted, as the night itself; she becomes a vortex, an absence, a black hole, one the male narrator cannot fill. Epitomizing the distinction between masculine presence and feminine absence in Bataille’s story is the scene at La Porte Saint-Denis, shown in this illustration by Hans Bellmer (**Figure 2.2**). This arch, located in the former red-light district of North Paris, embodies a threshold analogous to that Edwarda herself who crosses the realms of life and death. Recalling the quote from Sollers above, Hans Bellmer’s illustration captures this with the figure of the transgressive foot, placed both on the La Porte Saint-Denis archway and at the summit of Edwarda’s inverted, tortuous body.

On the far side of the archway, the narrator explains, is the “obscurity of death” (*l’obscurité de mort*), absence (absence), and even emptiness itself (*le vide*



**Figure 2.2.** Hans Bellmer, *Untitled* (Illustration for the folio edition of *Madame Edwarda*), 1946. “Elle avait disparu, mais je n’y pouvais croire. Je demeurais accablé devant la porte et j’entrais dans le désespoir immobile, le domino se perdait dans l’ombre.”

*même*). With a seductive back-step, Edwarda traverses threshold, disappearing into what the narrator calls “the nothingness of the arch” (*le néant de cette arche*). Though he follows her in frenzy, eager to embrace the agony (*agonie*) and suffering (*je désirais souffrir*) into the emptiness (*jusqu’au vide*), he never entirely traverses the arch: “je demeurais accablé devant la porte” he says, suggesting he is both “overwhelmed” and “condemned” (*accablé*). While he hesitates before the absence that would consume him and render him lost, Edwarda crosses the arch and “loses herself” (*se perdre*), only to be found later by the narrator on an empty terrace. As if woken from sleep (*comme si je l’éveillais*), she turns to the narrator and asks him “where am I?” (*Où suis-je?*). Whereas the narrator finds Edwarda, Edwarda herself is absent, lost in the night.<sup>65</sup> As this example illustrates, the difference between male and female characters in Bataille is less one of kind than of degree; Edwarda can “go further” than the narrator. She goes there where the narrator cannot; she is lost where he is found. Analogously, while the narrator continually describes the presentiment of absence, death, and loss, Edwarda actually achieves this absence; indeed, she *is* this absence.

Yet the distinction between masculine presence and feminine absence becomes less clear in moments of erotic encounter. The abjection, absence, and ecstasy Edwarda embodies infects the male narrator, who cannot desire or possess her without a commensurate experience of self-loss. When Edwarda first commands the narrator to kiss her, for example, he hesitates out of embarrassment but then proceeds, provoking an uncanny feeling of absence and vacuity:

Je tremblais: je la regardais, immobile, elle me souriait si doucement que je tremblais. Enfin, je m’agenouilla, je titubai, et je posai mes lèvres sur la plaie vive. Sa cuisse nue caressa mon oreille: il me sembla entendre un bruit de houle, on entend le même bruit en appliquant

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<sup>65</sup> ———, *Madame Edwarda. Le mort. Histoire de l’oeil*, 43.

l'oreille à de grandes coquilles. Dans l'absurdité du bordel et dans la confusion qui m'entourait (il me semble avoir étouffé, j'étais rouge, je suais), je restai suspendu étrangement, comme si Edwarda et moi nous étions perdus dans une nuit de vent devant la mer.<sup>66</sup>

As the narrative suggests, it becomes progressively ambiguous who is solid and who is hollow, who is present and who is absent. While the narrator trembles, Edwarda remains static, imperious. When he kneels before her, however, to kiss her “living wound” (*plaie vive*), he senses her emptiness as if hearing the sea inside of a conch shell. Yet this emptiness does not solely belong to Edwarda; the narrator too poses his “lips” (*lèvres*) to her “wound”--i.e., her “lips”--and the sound of her thigh fills his ear. With his mouth to her wound, her shell to his ear, it would seem that orifice meets orifice, emptiness meets emptiness, creating a greater “queer absence” between them both that, in the confusion of the bordello, becomes an even more vacuous “windy night before the sea” (*une nuit de vent devant la mer*) in which they are both lost (*nous étions perdus*). Edwarda’s inner-absence is ultimately indistinguishable from the narrator’s own suspension (*suspendu*), suffocation (*étouffé*), and self-loss in the bordello, as the figure of the abyssal sea is metonymically common to both (*houle, coquille, mer*). As a result, the narrator experiences Edwarda’s femininity “extimately,” Lacan might say--both from without *and* from within--encroaching upon the inner and outer-limits of his (masculine) identity.<sup>67</sup>

In his “Prostitution” chapter in *L'érotisme*, Bataille offers one of his more controversial and well-known (hetero)sexist claims. He asserts that prostitution is the logical result of what he calls the “l’attitude féminine”: “Il n’y a en chaque femme une

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 34-5.

<sup>67</sup> “Extimacy” (*extimité*) for Lacan expresses the psychic relationship between inside and outside characteristic of the Other and the unconscious; it is “quelque chose d'étrange pour moi, même si elle est au cœur de moi.” See the entry for “*extimité*” Jacques Lacan and Yan Pélissier, *Néologismes de Jacques Lacan* (Paris: Diffusion, VILO, 2002). Unlike *petit objet a* which heralds the foreclosure of desire upon an (equivocal) object within the symbolic order, Lacan’s Thing traces a primordial desire that, much like Bataille’s *Madame Edwarda*, precedes (or exceeds) all subjectivity and signification.

prostituée en puissance, mais la prostitution est la conséquence de l'attitude féminine."<sup>68</sup> In other words, while women typically withhold, men typically pursue, and the classic amorous project for men therefore becomes the discovery of the conditions under which the woman will surrender herself to the man. Yet, for Bataille, by restraining eroticism to a restricted commercial exchange, modern prostitution represents a degraded form of what was formerly a religious matter in the practice of hierogamy. This latter form constitutes "true" or "sacred prostitution" for Bataille because its purpose is religious rather than economic. Religious prostitution disrupts the profane world of commodity exchange and instead approximates sacrifice as a divine self-giving: "Dans la prostitution, il y avait consécration de la prostituée à la transgression. En elle l'aspect sacré, l'aspect interdit de l'activité sexuelle ne cessait pas d'apparaître: sa vie entière était vouée à la violation de l'interdit."<sup>69</sup> Given the dis-identificatory, self-differential practice of sacrifice elaborated above, there is an implicit challenge made to the heterosexist logic that undergirds his account of prostitution here, however. First, if indeed the prostitute is an "object of desire" for the male suitor, she is no mere object since the object of desire is "l'univers ou la totalité de l'être" and, as such, indivisible into distinct (gendered) parts.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, the sacrifice and transgression implied in prostitution for Bataille broaches an annihilation in which the identity of the woman—if not gendered identity itself—is lost in erotic self-surrender. Though Bataille emphasizes the sacrificial quality of the feminine, sacrifice is ultimately not uniquely feminine in this example; the man, too, gives himself up, if not in property, at least in the very erotic act itself, as we vividly see in *Madame Edwarda*. In religious prostitution, therefore, both man and woman engage in

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<sup>68</sup> Georges Bataille, *L'érotisme*, 145.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>70</sup> Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 8, 97.

a self-sacrifice that compromises their identities as man and woman, although the woman prostitute heralds this compromise before the man's approach. She provisionally embodies a degree of self-lack that the man lacks himself. The self-sacrificial eroticism of prostitution, by ultimately dissolving the limits of gendered identity and difference, transport masculine and feminine identity together into a queer realm of indeterminate genders and sexualities.<sup>71</sup>

Bataille's novel *Ma mère* is unique insofar as it structures subsequently queers gendered identity along Oedipal lines. The father is absent, and the specific audience of the narrative is obscure; Pierre addresses the reader as he does himself, making the addressee, indeed even the difference between him and the addressee, largely indeterminate. This narrative feature parallels the obscure fusion that continually occurs between Pierre and the other characters during those of "supreme voluptuousness" as he calls them: prayer, sex, and death. Against, or even because of his mother's admonitions, however, Pierre slowly comes to sample erotic indulgences which, ironically enough, his mother later forces upon him. In time, she comes to personify this indulgence itself, with all its accompanying transgressions and taboos. "Je connaissais maintenant ces voluptés: et malgré elle n'avait eu de cesse avant de m'avoir fait de quelque façon partager ce dont un commun dégoût l'exaltait jusqu'au délire. Elle était à l'instant devant moi—semblable à moi—dans l'étreinte de l'angoisse."<sup>72</sup> Noticeably, Pierre and his mother never embrace each other in Oedipal desire, but remain rather in the common embrace of disgust, anguish, and delirium that interrupts the Oedipal relation. Their "sameness" or identification (*semblable à moi*) arises not from a familial identification, nor from a mutual identification of any kind,

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<sup>71</sup> Michele Richman explains in her essay "Eroticism in the Patriarchal Order" that "the attraction between the sexes is an out-growth of the need to give, to transcend the barriers of an individual ego." Michele Richman, "Eroticism in the Patriarchal Order," *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism* 6, no. 1 (1976): 53.

<sup>72</sup> Georges Bataille, *Ma mère* (Paris: J. J. Pauvert, 1966), 121.

but from a common (self-sacrificial) loss of self in voluptuousness. This loss consequently obscures not only the difference between son and mother, Self and Other, but man and woman as well.

As a result, Pierre tells us he can fulfill the desire for his mother “indiscriminately in the arms of any other.” Explaining why he never physically approaches his mother, Pierre writes :

Le désir qui souvent me congestionna devant ma mère, indifféremment je pouvais le satisfaire dans les bras d’une autre. Ma mère et moi nous mettions facilement dans l’état de la femme ou de l’homme qui désire et nous ragions dans cet état, mais je ne désirais pas ma mère, elle ne me désirait pas. Elle était comme je sais qu’elle était dans les bois, je lui tenais les mains et je savais qu’elle était devant moi comme une ménade, qu’elle était folle, au sens propre du mot, et je partageais son délire. Si nous avions traduit ce tremblement de notre démence dans la misère d’un accouplement, nos yeux auraient cessé leur jeu cruel: j’aurais cessé de voir ma mère désirant de me regarder, ma mère aurait cessé de me voir délirer de la regarder. Pour les lentilles d’un possible gourmand, nous aurions perdu la pureté de notre impossible.<sup>73</sup>

Insofar as any other will suffice, because any other will suffice, Pierre can presumably choose indiscriminately between lovers--even indiscriminately between men and women--because his desire itself overturns such a gendered “state”: “nous mettions facilement dans l’état de la femme ou de l’homme qui désire et nous ragions dans cet état.” It is not so much that Pierre can or should desire others like he desires his mother; rather, it is that the state of desire itself, despite its object, which describes a deadly self-differentiating delirium. Desire as such becomes a self-sacrificial queerness, that which is “impossible” to attain in another, any other, since others are all equally inadequate, and therefore inversely equally adequate *vis à vis* this inner-otherness. According to Pierre, a physical advance towards his mother constitutes a

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 122.

degradation of the desire she represents and that he bears within. Ultimately, Pierre desires not a man, nor a woman, nor even his mother, but desire itself, which is dramatically captured in the frozen exchange of gazes. Given the pun on *lentille* (“lens,” “lentil”), their exchange of gazes “consume” each other, redoubling the spatial ambiguities between them. Should his desire be satisfied by union with his mother, the purity of their “impossible” desire (*pureté de notre impossible*) would have been compromised. Maintaining such desire instead maintains the mythic sylvan flight (*bois, ménade*) toward delirium in which gender differences are “consummated”; this consummation in turn relates to the woods, Pierre’s place of birth, linking their shared deadly delirium to life renewed.

The queer effects of desire arise again in “Sainte,” a short story part of the collection *Divinus Deus* of which *Ma mère* and *Madame Edwarda* are part. The unnamed protagonist recounts an orgy with the suggestively named Theresa and Sainte. When the church bell strikes nine, he looks at Sainte and says

cette sonnerie lente qui avait en moi, dans mon corps épuisé qu’une sueur froide baigner, une résonance pénible mais lointaine, me fit l’effet d’un accord intime avec cette femme si étrangère, si indument nue sur le lit, et que peut être je n’avais pas encore embrassée. Je ne sais quoi d’affreux nous séparait qui, plus profondément, nous unissait, nouait en nous ce lien de l’excessive souffrance, que de nouvelles souffrances feront plus étroit. A ce moment, je pressentis l’horreur du désir que déjà nos corps avaient l’un de l’autre, que peut être jamais nous n’aurions le pouvoir d’assouvir, et que dans cet espoir de l’assouvir, nous ne ferions que rendre plus impatient.<sup>74</sup>

The narrator’s curious “communion” with Sainte lies in the suffering and horror of a shared heteronormative desire. Again, it is a feminine presence that precipitates the male narrator’s reflection and deadly desire, yet such desire is not solely his own (as

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<sup>74</sup> Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 4, 306.



Winnubst's argument above already suggests). Powerless to satisfy such desire, both Sainte and the narrator, as commonly desiring subjects, realize the personal limits of their shared desire through suffering; going beyond these limits is "impossible," as he later tells us, as such would mean complete self-expropriation in death: "'assouvir,' 'impossible' étaient les mots qui balbutiaient en moi."<sup>75</sup> Yet it is at these limits that reciprocally animates their desire and transforms it into impatience, giving them renewed life *as* desire. At the limits of desire, the shared experience of death is also the shared experience of life, a sharing that at once unites (*unissait*) and separates (*separait*) them. This double-movement of desire simultaneously erases and retraces the boundaries of subjectivity, causing at once the undoing and division of subjects. Thus does the heteronormative subject, in its turn, die and get reborn, get queered and proliferate, illustrating a forever unfinished dialectic of sexual difference.

***Dialectic of Sexual Difference.*** As can be seen in the examples above, sexual difference in Bataille frequently follows an unresolved dialectical structure analogous to sacrifice. In literary form, this structure frequently occurs as *topos* with three narrative stages. The first stage of this *topos* establishes provisional heteronormative oppositions. Femininity incarnates eroticism and death, a sacred object of desire, while the male subject--frequently the narrator--occupies the profane space of law and life. Like the sacred for Durkheim, Bataille's women are "essentially heterogeneous" at this stage, and this heterogeneity establishes a more generally gendered heteronormativity. The woman signifies not masculinity's binary opposite, but rather abject non-identity or dis-identification, a kind of "present-absence" that differs analytically from masculinity and subjectivity. He *is*; she *is not*. She is pandemically everywhere, everyone and yet nowhere, nothing; as a result, the male character experiences the chimerical fear and fascination characteristic of sacred ambivalence,

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

while the woman figures the sacred itself. “On sait que les Anciens identifient,” writes Bataille in *L'Histoire de l'érotisme*, “la possession d’une femme au sacrifice. Je ne puis manquer à ce propos d’insister sur le fait que la femme est plus que l’homme le centre de l'érotisme. Elle est seule a pouvoir s’y consacrer.”<sup>76</sup>

In the second stage, the (male) subject confronts the feminine--like God--with ambivalent feelings of fear and wonder, perceiving it to be a seductive albeit perilous threat. Bataille’s male narrators, such as Pierre in *Ma mère* or Troppman in *Le blue du ciel*, for example, frequently announce their anxieties of death and delirium coupled with exultations of delight and desire. At this point, the heteronormative model of the first stage becomes compromised. The abject woman becomes an object of desire, and the male subject realizes that his identity becomes a false guise for a his own inner-otherness or self-differentiation, which surfaces through contact with the woman he desires. This is the property of the object of desire itself, which Bataille writes “est par essence un autre désir. Le désir des sens est le désir, sinon de se détruire, de bruler du moins et de se perdre sans réserve.”<sup>77</sup> Through contact, the woman thus transforms from a heterogeneous, abject Other into what Jacques Lacan called the “extimate object” (*objet extime*), the Other that also lies *within* the bounds of identity, being both exterior and intimate. Erotic contact with the feminine thus not only *transcends* masculinity into femininity, subject into abject, but it also manifests an *immanent* alterity--an “inner-woman” as it were--that is akin to death itself. Such is the ecstatic kinship between femininity, death, eroticism, which broaches self-sacrifice and otherness by both encroaching within and hollowing out the limits of masculine subjectivity.<sup>78</sup> The narrator of *Madame Edwarda* provides illustration of this

<sup>76</sup> Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 8, 337.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>78</sup> In *Histoire de l'érotisme*, Bataille writes “à cette connaissance préalable de la mort répond la connaissance de la sexualité, à laquelle contribuent, d’une part l’horreur ou le sentiment de la saleté de l’acte sexuelle” (Ibid., 70).

paradoxically immanent interiority and exteriority:

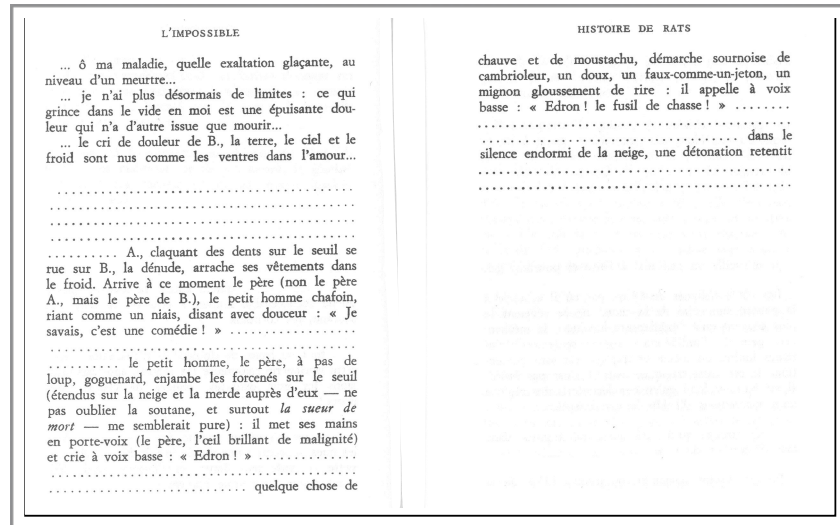
Mon angoisse s'opposait au plaisir que j'aurais du vouloir: le plaisir douloureux d'Edwarda me donna un sentiment épuisant de miracle. Ma détresse et ma fièvre me semblaient peu mais c'était là ce que j'avais, les seules grandeurs en moi qui répondissent à l'extase de celle que, dans le fond d'un froid silence, j'appelais "mon coeur."<sup>79</sup>

The narrator's own inner anguish (*angoisse*), distress (*détresse*), and fever (*fièvre*), reinforced by the use of personal and possessive pronouns (*me, ma, mon*), are indistinguishable from the ecstatic self-expropriation of Edwarda herself (*l'extase de celle*), whom he suggestively calls his "heart" (*mon coeur*). Her "outside" is also his "inside," tracing both the inside and outside of the narrator's dissolving subjectivity. Femininity and woman occupy the space of the narrator's own self-differentiation, making them the figure for self-sacrifice *par excellence*. The link between the immanence and transcendence of the feminine already betrays the undoing of the limits that trace male subjectivity, thus queering the provisional gendered difference between them.

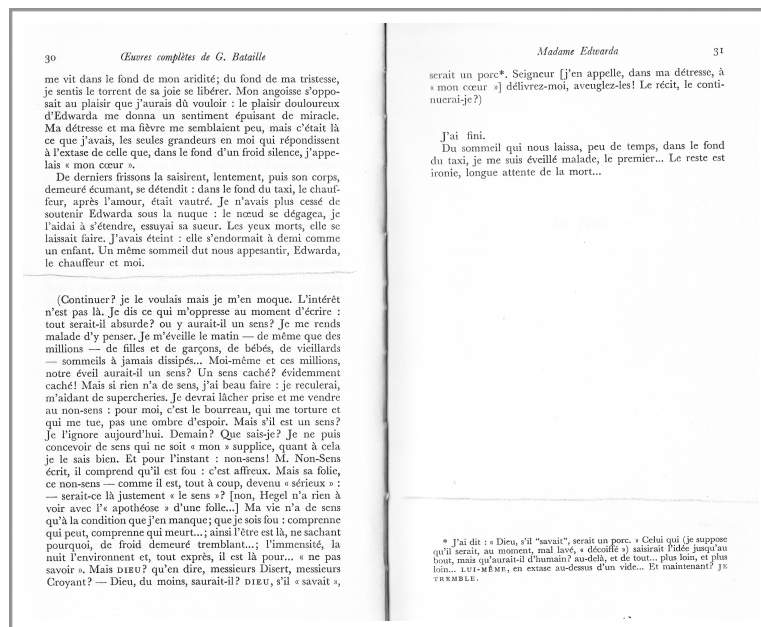
The third and final stage achieves the *queer* (1) fusion and (2) profusion of sexed identities, overturning the dualisms described in the first stage and imperiled in the second. This stage is that of intoxication, ecstasy, or death, wherein narrative voice is lost *either* in (a) ellipsis/empty space or, its complement, (b) the proliferation of parenthesis and possible voices, a formal feature accentuated by the chimerical genres combined in Bataille's texts. The fusion and profusion of identities parallels respectively the erasure and multiplication of narrative voices (1-a, 2-b). The illustration of (a) and (b) can readily be seen in *L'impossible* and *Madame Edwarda* (**Figures 2.3, 2.4**). These, in turn, can be understood as opposing sides of the dialectical threshold between life and death of self-sacrifice, or indeed mimetic and

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<sup>79</sup> Bataille, *Madame Edwarda. Le mort. Histoire de l'oeil*, 52.



**Figure 2.3.** This facsimile from *L'impossible* illustrates the series of disjointed sentences, colons, parenthetical comments, double-slashes, ellipses, exclamations, and quotations characterizing (a) and (b). The narrative here continues a previous one that is apparently absent, lost in the ellipsis between them. The narrator and narratee are uncertain, as are the relationships among the narrator, character A., and character B. mentioned in the second paragraph.



**Figure 2.4.** This is a facsimile from the concluding page of *Madame Edwarda*. The lower left illustrates a concluding parenthetical metacommentary with a recursive series of statements, including a footnote that appears at the bottom of the following pages (lower right). This recursive structure emulates a vortex at whose “bottom” (the footnote) is God, ecstasy, and death.

non-mimetic negativity, rendered in the form of literature and language (and their “self-sacrificial” limits in silence).

The concluding pages of *Madame Edwarda* exemplarily illustrate the narrative movement between 1-a and 2-b. The “human,” which arises in “L’apprenti sorcier” reappears at the conclusion of *Madame Edwarda* implies the fusion of different (sexed) identities (1-a) under a universal category that soon reveals itself to be hardly universal at all, or at least “universally different.” Much like Bataille in “L’apprenti sorcier,” the male narrator presents an analogous pursuit of the “human” attained at the cost of death, which in its turn suggests a potential multiplicity of narrators through a recursive framing structure that ambiguates the identity of narrative voice. While author Pierre Angelique (Bataille) writes the introductory essay, an unnamed narrator--from whom Angelique distances himself--tells the fragmented story itself, which concludes with the intervention of parenthetical metacommentary indiscernibly belonging to either Angelique or the male narrator, or even perhaps a potential “third” unknown voice. This parenthetical aside is itself peppered with a series of parenthetical statements and a single footnote--itself containing a parenthesis--that reprises the theme of humanity. This recursive, vertiginous narrative structure “ends” with ecstasy and God, which have a curious relationship to humanity:

J’ai dit: “Dieu, s’il ‘savait’, serait un porc.” Celui qui (je suppose qu’il serait, au moment, mal lavé, ‘décoiffé’) saisirait l’idée jusqu’au bout, mais qu’aurait-il d’humain? au-delà, et de tout...plus loin, et plus loin...LUI-MEME, en extase au-dessus d’un vide...Et maintenant? JE TREMBLE.<sup>80</sup>

This enigmatic note recalls the narrator’s earlier comment concerning his painful desire: “J’acceptais, je désirais de souffrir, d’aller plus loin, d’aller, dussé-je être

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<sup>80</sup> Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3, 31.

abattu, jusqu'au 'vide' même.”<sup>81</sup> Such agonizingly transgressive movements into

(self-)absence, animated by desire for Edwarda, in turn echo Anglique's essay, wherein he writes “nous devrions faire enfin table rase et revenir au temps de l'animalité...comme si l'humanité entière ne résultait pas de grands et violent mouvements d'horreur suivie d'attrait.”<sup>82</sup> These “grand and violent movements” Anglique describes are precisely those of the narrator as, who in his incessant desirous advances (*plus loin*) toward Edwarda--i.e., God, the supreme absence--cause him horror precisely due to a growing sense of self-absence akin to self-sacrifice, exemplified in the form of ellipsis. Yet this absence, in the form of ecstasy (*ecstase*) and emptiness (*vide*), also represents a certain “human” fulfillment, the realization of the human; that which captures (*saisir*) the human quality (*avoir d'humain*) of God is His--or rather *Her*--inherently ecstatic, transgressive nature (*au-delà, plus loin*) that embraces absence. Noticeably, Anglique and the narrator's self-differentiating narrative voices commonly imply the trace of a self-sacrificial femininity figured in the form of “Madame Edwarda,” understood as both the character *and* the text itself. Conceived as a series of recursive predicates, to be “human” is to be [not human [insofar as it is God [who is woman [who “is not”]]]]. Equally, a “man,” like the narrator or Anglique, is a man insofar as he is [not a man [insofar as he is God [who is woman [who “is not”]]]]. Such recursive predicates structurally parallel the dialectical self-differentiation of self-sacrifice earlier described.

**Conclusion.** In Bataille, women and femininity are often exemplars of self-sacrificial violence, eroticism, and death; they appear to be essentially self-differentiating. This character in turn structures a heteronormative, albeit provisional,

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 10.

sexual difference from men who, as narrators, illustrate a more stable subjectivity and a lesser degree of self-differentiation. It also structures Bataille's apparently heteronormative "law" of desire. Yet the man's heteronormative desire for women hews the path toward his self-sacrifice, first figured as sacred ambivalence but finally so in the form of radical self-differentiation, recounted in silence and the proliferation of narrative voices. Such self-differentiation reveals itself to be the same formerly specific to the feminine, first revealing the "extimacy" of femininity within masculine identity, but finally the prior sacrificial self-differentiation of all subjects, whether male or female, masculine or feminine. Predicated upon such self-differentiation, a plethora of possible sexed and sexual identities become possible in a common, transgressive space that both transcends--and completes--the law of heteronormativity. This queer space, which challenges such law, therefore also *supports* this law when figured as *exemplarily feminine*.

Such is the double-bind of Bataille's women. As femininity is provisionally "nothing," i.e., that which it is not, there where it is not, it can not and does not provide an exclusive or totalizable category under which identity can be securely assumed. The feminine is also somehow *not* feminine or, perhaps more accurately, the feminine "*is not*." It remains essentially self-differentiating, non-identical, which should not be confused with a lack of identity or the unidentified: whereas the latter implies the unfortunate absence of identity, the former *provocatively and repeatedly* challenges identity itself. As such, it is impossible to ultimately oppose the feminine to men or the masculine--or indeed to anything else--since that to which it would be opposed is always already included by its inherent non-identity. By extension, to say that "the feminine is not," also means also to say that "the feminine *is*," since, by differing from itself, it is always also that which it not, including men. One might even say that, for Bataille, the feminine in some sense is always the masculine, or that

the male is always also female, since both are equally possible in Bataille's queer, self-differentiating space of self-sacrifice.



### CHAPTER III

#### Laure's War: Life, Sovereignty, and the Sacred in Colette Peignot

*Le sacré...c'est ce pour quoi j'aurais donné ma vie.*

-Colette "Laure" Peignot

**Introduction.** Despite the publication of her writings some 35 years ago, woman author and political activist Colette Peignot (1903-1938)—also known as Laure, "*la sainte de l'abîme*"<sup>1</sup>—remains an obscure figure of the French avant-garde. The reasons for this are many; among them was her early death from tuberculosis at 35 and her relatively scant number of publications. Indeed, the greater part of her work might never have seen the light of day had it not been for her more visible friends, many of whom were among the most prominent French intellectuals of the inter-war period. In addition to Michel Leiris and Georges Bataille, who (illegally) prepared her writings for posthumous publication, she was friend to philosopher-activist Simone Weil and intimate with Boris Souvarine of *Le Cercle communiste démocratique*. Like them, she was politically engaged in the tumultuous interwar years, rejecting republicanism, Catholicism, fascism, and Stalinist Russia. In response to the growing fascist threat in the early 30s, she befriended Trotskyists and anti-Stalinists for political cause and inspiration and shared their political engagements. Her fervent dedication to the worker's cause motivated her learn Russian, visit the U.S.S.R., join Souvarine's anti-Stalinist group, and write for many preeminent leftist journals,

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<sup>1</sup> "The saint of the abyss," an appellation from Michel Leiris given in *La Règle du jeu*. This epithet derives from Gerard de Nerval's poem "Artemis," in which the Greek goddess is presented as a *femme fatale*. Milo Sweedler offers an excellent textual analysis of the name "Laure," which Peignot gave to herself in the final years of her life. More than a pseudonym, he claims that it is a playful, polysemic text given meaning by her two closest interlocutors, Bataille and Leiris. Whereas "Laure" offered yet another "erotic female figure" comparable to sacred elements like gold (*Laure, l'or*) for Bataille, for Leiris she served as a poetic muse much like Petrarch's Laura of *Rime sparse*. See Milo Sweedler, "Pierres angéliques and incandescences un peu chattes: Bataille, Leiris, and the Name of Laure," *Cincinnati Romance Review* 21 (2002): 34-48. Also useful for understanding the pseudonym is linguist and critic Mitsou Ronat's article "The Glorious Body of Laure" in Georges Bataille and Paul Buck, *Violent Silence : Celebrating Georges Bataille*, 1st ed. (London: Georges Bataille Event, 1984), 32-6.

including *Le Travailleur communiste syndical et coopératif*, *La Critique sociale* (in which Bataille published his famous “La Notion de dépense”) and, later, Bataille’s own political journal *Contre-attaque*. Her fidelities to the politics of the French Left would wane in the mid-1930s, however, when she would embrace an even more radical, if not entirely unwieldy position strongly influenced by her friends—principally Bataille—and her reading of William Blake, D.A.F. de Sade, and Friedrich Nietzsche. To be sure, she was not alone in this departure from normative politics; 1930s France fomented with diffuse and complex political attitudes of all kinds. The Spanish Civil War and the failure of the *Front populaire* in 1937 further intensified this trend. Figures like Louis Aragon called for the “crusade of poetry and art” while others like Georges Bernanos championed a gallic anti-fascist Catholicism. Disenchanted with the failures of both the Right and Left, many like Laure sought out a radically new politics beyond both sides of the political spectrum. As historian Jean Touchard explains, “dans les années 1930...tous rêvent de dépasser les oppositions traditionnelles, de rajeunir, de renouveler la politique française; tous se déclarent animés par une même volonté révolutionnaire.”<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the earliest traces of Laure’s own “volonté révolutionnaire” are to be found in her highly revealing self-chosen pseudonym, “Claude d’Araxe,” which derives from a memorable phrase taken from the Virgil’s *The Aeneid*, Book VIII, later placed atop a private letter to paramour Bataille: “*Pontem indignatus Araxes*” (“Araxes, indignant of bridges”). The Araxes, dividing Iran and Turkey on the one side and the former Soviet Union on the other, is a legendarily rapid and vehement river, one that historically confounded all attempts to build a bridge over it.<sup>3</sup> That

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<sup>2</sup> Guy Michaud, ed. *Tendances politiques dans la vie française depuis 1789*, Colloques: Cahiers de civilisation (Paris: Hachette, 1960), 89.

<sup>3</sup> As Jerome Peignot notes, the legend derives from Xerxes and Alexander the Great’s failed attempts to build a bridge over the river. See Laure, *Ecrits retrouvés* (Saint Pierre du Mont: Les Cahiers des Brisants, 1987), 13.

Laure used this as a pseudonym in her political writings no doubt recalls the culture that she admired, but it also exhibits a general virulence, rebelliousness, and recalcitrance, an obstinate refusal of all things stagnant, a denial of established limits, and an impassioned assent to transgress them. Her contempt for fixity—*l’emmerdement d’être fixé* as she once termed it—is ironically quite fixed throughout her writing, actions, and thought from this period. Her politics were by no means exempt from this contempt; ultimately, they adhered neither to an orthodox Marxism nor to the more coherent agenda of Souvarine and *le Cercle communiste démocratique*. If her early political revolt first found its home in the more established communist movement, it would later resist this very movement, taking the form not of organized coalition or political essay, but of poetry, aphorism, and fragmentary flights of the pen. These fervent yet ultimately unallied political beliefs made her a remarkable albeit enigmatic figure to her fellow leftist contemporaries. In her personal journal, for example, she wrote the following, privately addressing the enamored activist Jean Bernier: “Ma vie *inconsistante, ne servant à rien*, ce non-conformisme absolu te séduisait. N’étais-je pas éternellement inadaptable à tout ce qui m’entourait, irréductiblement cabrée contre [sic] tout. Mais révoltée? On ne l’est que si l’on agit—si on prouve sa révolte.”<sup>4</sup> Her unwieldy “revolt” represented not only a departure from Bernier or conventional politics, but the embrace of a more general revolt irreducible to virtually any positive political affirmation. “Je ne suis jamais là,” she writes in 1938, “où les autres croient me trouver et pouvoir me saisir.”<sup>5</sup> Some 50 years later, her nephew and editor similarly explains that, in the years before WWII, “il est assez vain

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<sup>4</sup> Jean Bernier and Dominique Rabourdin, *L’amour de Laure*, Textes (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), 89. As evidenced by their collected correspondence, Laure engaged their tumultuous relationship with equal caprice and resistance, understanding it to be an expression of life’s inherent mutability.

<sup>5</sup> Laure and Jérôme Peignot, *Ecrits de Laure* (Paris: J.J. Pauvert, 1971), 126.

de se demander quelle eut été son attitude à l'époque."<sup>6</sup> The obdurate revolt Laure avowed, however, represents neither a facile stubbornness nor an obscurantist equivocation. Though surely a profound departure from normative political thought and action, it also signifies the embrace of a radical praxis that compelled her to perpetually redefine her political identity, indeed personal-identity itself, thus enabling subject-positions varied and multiple: sovereign, revolutionary, feminine, queer. By revealing the mutability of self-identity, she sought to expose the manifold identities—indeed the social and political *plurality*—implied in any singular notion of selfhood. Such was the praxis of her literary endeavor: to reveal the paradoxical role of power—especially divine power—in the ongoing production of different identities. The many figures that animate her writings, which include angels, whores, and sovereigns, share this in common: all are “revolutionary” subjects resulting from the transformative and revolutionary qualities of this power, a power that Laure, following her peers, would name “the sacred.” To live a revolutionary life, for Laure, was thus to live a religious life, a life lived in pursuit of the sacred. Perhaps above all, this pursuit entails a life—and, for Laure, a literature—dedicated to the practice of self-sacrifice.

***Revolutionary Life.*** Bataille and Leiris, who were perhaps her closest friends during her final years, took her protean tendencies quite seriously as a “position” that transcended all forms of political partisanship. After her death, Leiris writes that Laure was “un être dont ceux qui l’ont approchée n’ignorent pas combien inentamable était son exigence de hauteur et violent sa rébellion contre les normes à quoi souscrivent la plupart.”<sup>7</sup> This radical tendency caused her to abandon established political engagements and embrace a “position” that required a new conception of the political itself. In his notes for the published collection he entitled *Le Sacré*, Bataille explains:

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<sup>6</sup> Laure et al., *Une rupture 1934 : correspondances croisées de Laure avec Boris Souvarine, sa famille, Georges Bataille, Pierre et Jenny Pascal, Simone Weil* (Paris: Editions des Cendres, 1999), 21.

<sup>7</sup> Laure, *Ecrits retrouvés*, (back cover).

Les faits l'ayant amenée à rejeter comme dénuée de valeur l'activité politique, il lui fallut se relever, selon son expression: 'de ce grand tremblement de terre qu'est la perte d'une foi'. Sans cesser de connaître des moments de détresse—comme de bonheur ou de caprice—elle parvint à retrouver un état de conscience plus total que jamais, l'ambition la plus haute que put réaliser quelqu'un pour qui l'intégrité de l'être a sans doute occupé, dans l'échelle des valeurs, le rang privilégié.<sup>8</sup>

According to Bataille's description, Laure's divorce from political engagement was a fortuitous "loss of faith" (*perte d'une foi*), since it seismically ungrounded her political position and delivered her over to an abyssal consciousness greater still (*plus total que jamais*), an awareness of a totality that political orthodoxy restrained, the so-called "integrity of being."<sup>9</sup> Her former revolt against the established bourgeois state, it would seem, transformed into the revolt against all things establishmentarian and stagnant, all things that would deny the "integrity" of all things in being. It is in this latter, more ontological sense that revolt has its ultimate meaning for Laure. The fight

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<sup>8</sup> Laure and Peignot, *Écrits de Laure*, 129.

<sup>9</sup> Laure mentions this "integrity" frequently in her writing. In an unsent letter, she references "tout ce qui dépend seulement de l'intégrité totale" (Ibid., 124). In the "Carnet rouge" dated 1938, she begins a short free-verse poem with the following: "Retrouver la vie dans son intégrité/dans sa totalité" (Ibid., 197). In a sordid letter to Bataille, she writes "Pas de transaction dans l'intégrité, la plénitude...la vie" (Ibid., 263). In each case, integrity describes an amorphous composite rather than a unified whole. In the letter to Bataille, the "integrity of life" is reason not for unifying their relationship but for challenging it; it demands that the relationship should resist comfort and predictability. Likewise, the capricious moments of "happiness and distress" Bataille describes in his note—whether felt in the act of love or political revolt—seem to evoke an intransigence akin to this "integrity."

against all ends is the impossible and paradoxical “end” of authentic revolt.<sup>10</sup> Expressing this revolt, her writings are consistent—or consistently inconsistent—in their variety and recalcitrance, evincing a struggle against the oppressive violence of all normative limits—whether political, economic, moral, or religious. Equally revolutionary were her chimerical literary amalgams of poetry, prose, citations, epistles, calligrams, notes, and philosophical aphorisms. Indeed, Bataille and Lieris noted how much she detested normative literature and the bourgeois traditionalism it represented.<sup>11</sup> Yet this revolutionary disposition is not simply a “counter-violence” to the violence of restrictive norms, whether political or literary; rather, it is a violence even more fundamental, one (as she says) “irréductiblement cabrée contre tout.” A life lived faithfully to the “integrity of being” maintains this state of violent revolt, which

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<sup>10</sup> Bataille advanced a similar notion in his essay “L’apprenti sorcier,” when he writes that “...la destinée d’un homme ne devient pas réel à la seule condition qu’il combatte. Il faut encore que cette destinée se confonde avec celle des forces dans les rangs desquelles il affronte la mort” (Georges Bataille and Denis Hollier, *Le Collège de sociologie : 1937-1939* [Paris: Gallimard, 1979], 322). In the mythopoesis Bataille advances in this essay, the violent confrontation with death is paramount as an expression of *amor fati*, i.e., the only “real” human destiny. The conditions, purpose, or means of such a confrontation are secondary if not irrelevant, since Bataille views these as profane limitations of a grandiose, sacred meeting with death. Such an expression, absolute and unqualified, does not preclude the possibility of combat fought either in the name of the state or revolution. This is precisely what permits Bataille’s critics to question his relationship to fascism, despite his own opposition to it. I would argue that the same debate would likely apply to Laure as well. Pierre Klossowski for example, famously reports that Walter Benjamin, who was in attendance at the meetings of the Collège, indicted Bataille for fascism. For more on the Benjamin-Bataille relationship and the question of fascism, see Michael Weingrad, “The College of Sociology and the Institute of Social Research,” *New German Critique*, no. 84 (2001); Pierre Klossowski and Jean-Maurice Monnoyer, *Le peintre et son démon : entretiens avec Pierre Klossowski* (Paris: Flammarion, 1985), 185-6; Jochen Horisch, “Benjamin entre Bataille et Sohn-Rethel: Theorie de la dépense, dépense de la théorie,” in Miguel Abensour et al., *Walter Benjamin et Paris : colloque international 27-29 juin 1983*, (Paris: Cerf, 1986).

<sup>11</sup> As a reader of (then) subversive authors like Sade, Nietzsche, Blake, and Dostoevsky, Laure associated traditional literature and literati with a stagnancy inimical to revolutionary life. “Mais la misère,” Leiris and Bataille note, “inhérent a tout ce qui est littérature lui faisait horreur: car elle avait le plus grand souci qui puisse se concevoir de ne pas livrer ce qui lui apparaissait déchirant à ceux qui ne peuvent pas être déchirés” (Laure and Peignot, *Écrits de Laure*, 47).

is not unlike that of Nietzschean self-overcoming or Camusian rebellion.<sup>12</sup> Eternally mutable, the violence of authentic resistance for Laure acts neither for nor against particular ends but, like a Sadean libertine, strives endlessly against everything servile to such ends. In other words, such violence not only resists; it also forever resists this resistance in a kind of combined literary, political, and philosophical *mise en abyme*. It is therefore difficult to precisely characterize those attributes that place Laure, *la sainte de l'abîme*, among the French Left and avant-garde; such attributes, even those that presumably undermine convention and progressive politics, are often found to undermine themselves, thus evoking a kind of “absolute resistance” refusing codification. The rejection of her bourgeois republicanism, for example, and her subsequent rejection of this rejection—such as her break from communism, commonly express such resistance without a transcendental endpoint. As she writes repeatedly in her letters, poetry, and prose, “tout va à l’encontre du but.”<sup>13</sup>

Generally speaking, Laure sought a more vital “activism” in which life violently confronts its own “end” through endless revolt. She considered revolt itself

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<sup>12</sup> Indeed, she asks in one of her political writings if “Nietzsche a plus fait pour la libération de l’homme que Lénine?” (Ibid., 184). If the eternal return and self-overcoming could emancipate man more effectively than the Bolshevik Revolution, it was presumably because they do not limit themselves to national or personal affairs, political ends, or class interests, but rather embrace all of existence as an eternal and revolutionary will to power. To be sure, Camus’ articulation of revolt is different, especially insofar as he distinguishes it from “le monde du sacré,” yet the comparison is still fruitful. In *L’Homme révolté*, the significance of revolt lies simply in the fact that men assert their existential freedom to resist in unjust circumstances. Camus is wary, however, to make the explicit connection between metaphysical revolt and a particular political program, however revolutionary; there is no particular action or duty given to *l’Homme révolté*. Laure is like Camus in this regard: revolt has value in itself in giving value and meaning to existence, and this revolt can be expressed *either through self-sacrificial life or death*. “On croit tout détruire et emporter avec soi,” in suicide, “mais de cette mort même renaît une valeur qui, peut-être, aurait mérité qu’on vécût.” See Albert Camus, *L’Homme révolté*, Collection Idées 36 : Philosophie (Paris: Gallimard, 1973). Ruth Reichelberg argues that there is a notion of sacredness in Camus’ thought, though it is anchored rather in a sense of existential nostalgia and being-in-the-world; see Ruth Reichelberg, *Albert Camus : une approche du sacré* (Paris: A.G. Nizet, 1983).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 110. This statement is repeated in her correspondence and poetry alike. In this way, Laure could be considered an author in dialog with the resurgent Hegelianism of 1930s France under Jean Hyppolite and Alexander Kojève, who actively attended (like Laure) the periodic meetings of the College of Sociology. Though she never mentions Hegel in her writing, her “negative dialectics” might be considered analogous to that of Bataille in “Hegel, la mort, et le sacrifice.” See Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 12, 326-345.

to be a *raison d'être*, an activity integral to “true life” (*la vraie vie*) as she called it, borrowing from Rimbaud’s *Une saison en enfer*.<sup>14</sup> In response to an article in the Soviet newspaper *Pravda*, for example, she writes “je trouve que la valeur de la vie dans la société actuelle ne peut être que dans l’esprit de résistance et de révolte et dans l’expression active de cette résistance et de cette révolte.”<sup>15</sup> The object of revolt is curiously absent in this statement, seemingly eclipsed by the apparent value of revolt itself. More than political vigilance or the search for justice, she advances revolt as the very *condicio sine qua non* (*ne peut être que*) of authentic life, *la vraie vie*. The resistance “for” or “against” a particular cause is far less meaningful than the resistance itself, since life, in its “true” form, in its “integrity,” is nothing but this resistance. To resist the conditions of life is thus to promote life itself: “Laisser aller contre la vie,” she writes, “ce serait ceux-là qui sont *pour* la vie.”<sup>16</sup> In this way, Laure’s conception of life evokes a non-systematic *Lebensphilosophie* that falls within the tradition of Heinrich Rickert, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Nietzsche.

Thus Laure’s revolutionary life is a *contradictio in adjecto*. True life, *la vraie vie* is death, and death would be, so to speak, a “successful revolt without a victory.” This life, the life of revolt, the revolt that *is* life is possible for Laure only as an impossibility; such a life becomes possible only at the limit when life continually

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<sup>14</sup> Bataille confirms the reference in his notes (Ibid., 77). The reference is found in the section “Délires I” in *Une saison en enfer* when the *Vierge Folle* says: “Quelle vie! La vraie vie est absente. Nous ne sommes pas au monde.” For the widow speaker, “true life” is the otherworldly life of deliverance from the marital yolk of the *Epoux infernale*. In repose, he proclaims his disdain for marriage and the female pursuit of security: “L’amour est à réinventer, on le sait. Elles [women] ne peuvent plus que vouloir une position assurée.” Rimbaud’s “true life”—his otherworldly place of desire beyond constraint—recalls Laure’s dynamic vision of life and revolt. Milo Sweedler explains that this term and Rimbaud reference illustrates Laure’s sadomasochistic relationship with Edward Trautner in Berlin. See Milo Sweedler, “Autohagiography: The *Ecrits de Laure*,” *Dalhousie French Studies* 71 (2005).

<sup>15</sup> Laure and Peignot, *Écrits de Laure*, 191. She echoes this claim in her poetry and political essays alike; elsewhere she writes “la valeur de la vie ne peut être que résistance et révolte exprimées avec toute l’énergie du désespoir” (Ibid., 183).

<sup>16</sup> Laure, *Ecrits retrouvés*, 82.



confronts its end in death.<sup>17</sup> Life thus lived constantly undermines its own possibility, and yet also rediscovers its own purpose and value *as* impossibility. Such a life therefore traces an aporetic limit: it acquires value and meaning on the condition of revolt and death, and such revolt, *qua* absolute, necessarily revolts against this acquisition of meaning. For Laure, then, one might say that revolt is the condition *of life, for life, against life*. Such a life meets its fateful end endlessly in moments of creative self-transformation for which “revolt” is the model. With this creative caprice, Laure believed that she lead such a life—and thus had long been dead. “Je n’habitais pas la vie,” she writes in the opening poem of *Le sacré*, “mais la mort.”<sup>18</sup> In the ongoing confrontation with death that Laure’s work elaborates, the dualism of life and death are undone in a simultaneous and mutual negation and affirmation. What remains is an undetermined space, a radical potential wherein both the life and death of the subject are both possible outcomes of this same immanent potential. This potential possesses therefore an instance of radical power able to affirm life or threatens its end, even affirm life while threatening its end. “Revolt,” “life,” and “death” represent different phases of the “movement” Laure might say, i.e., differing vectors of an immanent and absolute power working in, for, and against the life of the subject called “the sacred.”

***Living as Part of the Movement.*** Moments before her death in 1938, Laure scrawled her last words on a small piece of paper: “faire passer votre charrure sur les os des morts.” This proverb, taken from William Blake’s “Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” was less a *momento mori* than a kind of valediction forbidding mourning: if, as the irony of Blake’s proverb suggests, the dead serves as the fertile soil of new life,

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<sup>17</sup> Having suffered from tuberculosis from the age of 13, Laure constantly confronted the limits of her own mortality. As she frequently mentioned in correspondence to family and friends, she considered her frequent illness as a testament to the “true life” that always bears witness to death.

<sup>18</sup> Laure and Peignot, *Écrits de Laure*, 83.

then the occasion of her own death was for Laure not simply a tragedy but a celebration, indeed the greatest expression of life itself, the successful revolt of life against death. This repeated proverb, perhaps more so than any other she quotes, exemplifies the paradoxical “movement” between life and death characterizing the sacred itself. At the very beginning her brief theoretical description of the concept (*le sacré*), Laure insists on the paradoxical movement of a life lived principally through and for death:

Le sacré est ce moment infiniment rare où la “part éternelle” que chaque être porte en soi entre dans la vie, se trouve emporté dans le mouvement universel, intégrée dans ce mouvement, réalisée. C’est ce que j’ai ressenti comme mis en balance avec la mort, scellé par la mort. Cette permanence de la menace de la mort est l’absolu enivrant qu’emporte la vie, la soulève hors d’elle-même, projeté au dehors le fond de moi-même comme une éruption de volcan, une chute de météore.<sup>19</sup>

The “eternal share” (*part éternelle*) of every life is “carried away” (*emporté*) into this universal movement sustains itself, actualizes itself, only through the constant threat of death (*scellé par la mort; permanence de la menace de la mort*). Thus, the sacred is not the triumph of death over life or in life, but the integration (*intégrée*) of life and death in a movement that conjoins them in and through opposition. Death is not the end, but the “movement” of oneself from oneself, the “division” or “sharing” (*part, partage*) of oneself, one’s “getting carried away” with death, by death—in life (*entre dans la vie, se trouve emporté*). Thus in the movement of life, death is the *plus ultra* of the ultimate *nec plus ultra*, a kind of condemned salvation lived in and through death

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 85. The momentariness of the sacred described here echoes Bataille’s essay “Le sacré” published in 1939. What he calls “l’instant sacré” is a “privileged instant” something is witnessed that never “constitue une substance à l’épreuve du temps, tout au contraire, ce qui fuit aussitôt apparu et ne se laisse pas saisir.” See Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, 560. The endeavor of modern art, he explains, was to recapture this lost moment. Bataille speaks analogously of “movement” as well in *L’Erotisme* when he writes “Il y a un excès horrible du mouvement qui nous anime: l’excès éclaire le sens du mouvement” (Georges Bataille, *L’erotisme* [Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1957], 26).

itself. Each being (*chaque être*) is continually divided between life and death in the very exchange described above. In this “universal movement” where death is a constant threat, death enables life to transcend itself (*emporte la vie, la soulève hors d’elle-même*), but this transcendence does not necessarily culminate in a heavenly afterlife or fascist state; rather, transcendence is found in the “movement” itself, the “intoxicating absolute” (*l’absolu enivrant*) that sustains life through sustaining the threat of death, through the impossible exchange of life for death, death for life.<sup>20</sup> Properly speaking, this is not true “transcendence” at all, but rather a form of response or return, even an eternal return, to the self-same life, the same death, that “eternal” share, carried away by the prior universal movement that is its both its origin and destination. Life is thus ecstatic, “raised beyond *itself*” (*soulevé hors d’elle même*), like a shooting star or erupting volcano. Indeed, if it goes beyond itself, it was always already going beyond itself, embroiled in the “universal movement” that disperses and dispenses the universal share of every being.<sup>21</sup> The polysemy of *scellé* here is hence poignant and evocative, referring at once to a tell-tale mark, a form of sanctioning, and a kind of limit or closure. The sacred is indeed all three: the sign of a vital eternal share, a sanctioned mortal threat, and a limit of possible transcendence.

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<sup>20</sup> The rhetoric of life, death, and transcendence evoked here may reverberate with fascist ideology of life lived for the state and communal sacrifice; as Denis Hollier remarks, “the triumph of death is part of a somber mysticism that is indissociable from fascist ideology” (Denis Hollier and R. Howard Bloch, *A New History of French Literature* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994], 923). Such is also an unmistakable aspect of Georges Sorel’s political thought and what some have called his “Left fascism,” especially with its mythic conception of the proletarian general strike, which Sorel understood to be a kind apocalyptic sacrificial violence able to realize the solidarity of the working class and its future. However, the unbound potential implied in Laure’s idea of “movement” and the “universal share” remains analytically distinct from—though not necessarily *opposed to*—the corporative nature of fascism, which would represent only a single possible (and ultimately transient) result. Laure’s formulation of self-sacrifice, which demands ongoing resistance and repetition, would not content itself either with the violent triumph of the proletariat or the realization of a transcendent *Volksgeist*. Vis à vis Bataille, Denis Hollier carefully negotiates the equivocal and sometimes competing values of French avant-gardism and political engagement in Denis Hollier, “On Equivocation (between Literature and Politics),” *October* 55(1990): 12.

<sup>21</sup> This is another instance in which Laure’s writings echo Nietzsche’s *amor fati*, eternal return, and self-overcoming; in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, stars and volcanoes serve as metaphors of self-transcendence.

The meaning of “movement” is therefore itself quite mobile. While at times it refers to a kind of motivation, cause, or direction, it elsewhere suggests a more metaphysical concept of ecstasy and transcendence akin to what Bataille calls “continuity.”<sup>22</sup> In a letter to Simone Weil concerning her own personal relationship with the aloof Boris Souvarine, Laure explains that she must rediscover her own inner-strength and live *sua sponte*: “je veux vivre de mon propre mouvement.”<sup>23</sup> While movement here would appear to be a form of focused self-assertion and self-motivation, it elsewhere describes a more ambivalent stance (albeit one more trustworthy than the presumed certainty of reason): “Pour moi: ne jamais douter de mon propre mouvement, de ce qui est en moi attirance et répulsion quand le jugement intellectuel me fait défaut.”<sup>24</sup> As an alternative to the failures of “intellectual judgment,” this movement offers a more affective, bodily response without precise direction, one lead precariously by the vicissitudes of a physical attraction and repulsion like those found in the tenet of sacred ambiguity. In the former case, movement is a kind of will that forcibly “moves” her closer to herself, away from Souvarine. In the latter, movement is an alien power that, through desire, moves her away from herself. The ambiguity of “movement” as either a form of self-motivation or self-annihilation itself suggests not two forms of movement, but rather a paradox inherent in the same movement. Vacillating between a native and foreign impetus, such movement traces and retraces the very limits of embodiment and disembodiment, identity and alterity. In an untitled poem that itself vacillates on the page, Laure writes:

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<sup>22</sup> Bataille offers his most explicit explanation of this concept in *L'érotisme*: “Nous sommes des êtres discontinues, individus mourant isolément dans une aventure inintelligible, mais nous avons la nostalgie de la continuité perdue.” This concept is the ontological starting point for the rest of his argument in a text otherwise dedicated to diverse social phenomena. See Bataille, *L'érotisme*, 22.

<sup>23</sup> Laure et al., *Une rupture 1934 : correspondances croisées de Laure avec Boris Souvarine, sa famille, Georges Bataille, Pierre et Jenny Pascal, Simone Weil* (Paris: Editions des Cendres, 1999), 46.

<sup>24</sup> Laure and Peignot, *Écrits de Laure*, 193. This statement is taken from *Notes sur la révolution*, a sordid collection of reflections on communism, the USSR, the Left, and the meaning of political resistance.

Et puis un jour le MOUVEMENT  
restreint

et puis  
libre

Vie physique  
le corps comme  
la plante  
la plante la  
terre

Comme s'il s'implantait dans la terre  
par  
le mouvement...<sup>25</sup>

The restraint and release of this movement, echoing the alternation between life and death, identity and alterity, also marks a form of organic continuity in which pure physical life may become actualized as, for example, plant or earth. "Movement" pervades physical life of all kinds, thus the identity of the plant, body, and earth are commonly created and undone in the radical metamorphosis this vital movement describes. As the poem suggests, such a metamorphosis is predicated upon a common vital embodiment (*vie physique*), a common living potential that Giorgio Agamben calls "bare life."<sup>26</sup> This potential becomes actualized in the "movement" that transforms bare life into body, plant, and earth—and back.

Perhaps among the most concise evocations of this vital movement is to be found in an untitled prose poem from *Le Sacré*: "La vie répond—ce n'est pas vain / on

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>26</sup> See Chapter One, pp. 30-46. Agamben claims in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* that sacred or "bare life," what Aristotle calls *zoe*, "expresses the simple fact of living common to all living beings," is a state that leaves life open to the most violent political use under sovereignty, its juridical twin. Drawing upon jurist Carl Schmitt, he claims that both commonly occupy "the state of exception" from the law, whereby, for example, a life may be killed but not sacrificed or murdered since it is "beyond the law." Whereas Agamben polemically views bare life as violent politico-juridical category, Laure presents it to be a state that cannot be wholly appropriated or reduced to specific juridical or political ends. This may serve as a counterpoint for Agamben's analysis of the French *Ecole sociologique* and the College of Sociology in the section of the book (itself) entitled "Homo Sacer," wherein he argues that sacred life always ends up becoming a violent political power.

peut agir / contre—pour / la vie exige le mouvement.”<sup>27</sup> “The movement” life requires, like revolt, is necessarily countervailing; it is the movement for *or* against something that, through resistance, defines and actualizes the action as such. The movement or action of life always moves toward or against a potential threshold that *will* define it and delimit it, giving it significance as a form of resistance and thus a form of “true life.” In this sense, the future goal of the movement is less significant than movement itself, that is, the *potential* of or for movement at all, which life necessitates (*exiger*). The movement of life trumps any future purpose, cause, or limit towards which it is directed, though such direction is necessary; everything is equally and simultaneously possible in the vital unified movement “for—against” (*contre—pour*) in which life confronts its own mortal limits. At these limits, the movement of life is always for *or* against, always for *and* against, in a futural ebb and flow whose vectors simultaneously mandate and defy the limits that bind it. Therefore, “la vie répond.” Life “responds” to these limits as both as a prior condition for “movement” and a possible threshold to trespass. Thus the movement of life and life’s limits are bound only to be unbound; if life “responds” to such limits—one might say it exchanges promises with such limits (L. *res-pondere*, “to promise back,” “to pledge in return”) by requiring them to define and understand the direction and purpose of life’s actions. Any action, whether for or against a particular end, is thus never “vain” (*vain*) since life only acquires value, meaning, and purpose *in response* to that end.

Given Laure’s description, therefore, the following propositions concerning “universal movement” describing the sacred are simultaneously possible. Such “movement” is: 1) the movement of life toward life; 2) the movement of life away from life; 3) the movement of life toward death; 4) the movement of life away from death; 5) the movement of death toward death; 6) the movement of death away from

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<sup>27</sup> Laure and Peignot, *Écrits de Laure*, 95.

death; 7) the movement of death toward life; 8) the movement of death away from life. In each case, the binarism of life and death is both created and undone in and by a continual to-and-fro movement, a promised “response”—promised insofar as it *is* a response—to the movement of life, to the potential of life, to “bear life.” The movement of the sacred universal share is a vectoring of an immanent possibility, i.e., the actualization of a native potential for life or death that always returns to itself. In each case, moreover, there remain infinite possible lives—like those of the plant or earth—and therefore infinite possible deaths as well. The “infinitely rare” moment in which the paradoxical coincidence of these eight potential movements arises (and returns) is, in brief, one potential way in which to articulate the “universal movement” characterizing the sacred.

***Sacrificial Life.*** For Laure, the figure of “life” is much like nature or the life of a political revolutionary; it describes not only being part of a movement, but an action, a response, a pledge, a promise, the delivery of something to come. It inheres in a futural economy of change and exchange with and into what is other, evoking an ethics to which I will later return. In the natural “movement” life describes, this promise succeeds without fulfillment, and this exchange is never completely transacted. “La vie répond—ce n’est pas vain / on peut agir / contre—pour / la vie exige le mouvement.”<sup>28</sup> By responding to such endless ends, life enters into a kind of eternal contract wherein it vows to “give itself up” to an impossible end in order to (re)acquire itself as that which *has* given itself up. The movement of life, the “response” of life, in other words, therefore describes a form of sacrifice wherein life itself is both expropriated and (re)appropriated in a movement that is always “on the way,” always “returning” to itself—and (also) to that which is other. When Laure writes that the sacred is that “pour quoi j’aurais donné ma vie”—she describes

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

thereby a commodity that would have been both given up *and* given back as a meaning or value for the life she gave; her life would have been given back *qua* “something-given-up.” In the same brief essay on the sacred, for example, she writes:

Les ‘démarches’ les plus décisive de ma vie ont toujours été accomplices dans un état de transe qui seul me permettait d’agir envers et contre toute entrave (lucidité, faiblesse physique, etc.). C’est ce pour quoi j’aurais donné ma vie. Si un être ne peut pas ou plus éprouver ce sentiment, sa vie est comme privée de sens, privée de sacré.<sup>29</sup>

The “decisive” stages of Laure’s life were essentially confrontational: those moments that she considered sacred and in which she “advanced” (*démarche*), were paradoxically those moments in which she was inhibited or incapacitated (*entrave*). Her movement toward is also a movement away. It is for these moments when she is most unable to give that she “would have given her life,” since such inability paradoxically enables life’s action (*agir*) and meaning (*sens*). In other words, when she explains that she would have “given her life to the sacred,” she implies that she will get something back--action, feeling (*sentiment*), value, meaning, etc.--those things without which life is meaningless (*privée de sens*). Therefore, when she says that the sacred was worthy of self-sacrifice, she means that she would have sacrificed her life *in order to get it back*. The gift of life gives back the gift it gave.

The kind of exchange described here recalls Marcel Mauss’ classic definition of sacrifice in “Essai sur la nature et fonction de sacrifice” (1899), which demands a brief recapitulation. “Dans tout sacrifice,” Mauss writes, “il y a un acte d’abnégation, puisque le sacrifiant se prive et donne...Si le sacrifiant donne quelque chose de soi, il ne se donne pas; il se réserve prudemment. C’est que, s’il donne, c’est en partie pour recevoir.” The gift the executioner gives is also taken back. Mauss claims, therefore,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 85.



that the practice of sacrifice is predicated on the idea of *rachat*—“buyback,” or, in its religious context, “redemption”: “Il n’y a pas de sacrifice ou n’intervienne quelque idée de rachat.”<sup>30</sup> If life is bought back by the executioner at the cost of the scapegoat in traditional sacrifice, however, the case of self-sacrifice, such as is found in Laure, is more sharply paradoxical. Laure insists that self-sacrifice is the proper form of the sacred in her extended description of the sacred; recounting a memory she claims “résume complètement ma notion du sacré” she writes that it “provoqua en moi un état d’exultation totale, fait de pressentiment certain, de sacrifice *consenti d’avance* et devant le visage même du sacrifié.”<sup>31</sup> In this situation, wherein the executioner and scapegoat are identical, both life and death are *given up and given back* in the buyback, since what is given up and what is received are the very same “thing.” Unlike the case of traditional sacrifice wherein life remains at the expense of death, in this case, life and death are commonly both conserved and expended. What is (re-) appropriated therefore in this paradoxical exchange is not the life the executioner, but the impossible *coincidenta oppositorum* of life and death, selfhood and otherness, executioner and scapegoat in the same immanent time and place of return. Thus, in the final analysis, even the term “self-sacrifice” in the case of Laure is something of a misnomer, since the self thus sacrificed always already implies an otherness that precedes and exceeds it in death.

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<sup>30</sup> See Marcel Mauss and Viktor Karady, *Oeuvres, vol. I: Les fonctions sociales du sacré*, (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1968), 304. In this way, Laure’s presentation of sacrifice, perhaps even despite her influences and intention, lies midway between Mauss’ and Bataille’s. Though Bataille is reported to have derived his understanding of sacrifice from Mauss, his own conception differs considerably. When Bataille writes in *Théorie de la religion* that “le sacrifice est l’antithèse de la production,” he argues that sacrifice, unlike traditional potlatch and gift-exchange, constitutes a form of radical expropriation without return. “C’est en ce sens qu’il est don et abandon, mais ce qui est donné ne peut être un objet de conservation pour le donataire” (Georges Bataille, *Théorie de la religion* [Paris: Gallimard, 1974], 66). Bataille does make great use of Mauss’ conclusion that the most basic of all forms of sacrifice consists in sacrifice of the god(s), however, with which he associates the Nietzschean death of God and Dionysian intoxication.

<sup>31</sup> Laure and Peignot, *Écrits de Laure*, 88. Emphasis mine.

In the prose-poem “8” from the same volume, the same impossible “return” of self-sacrifice occurs. Indeed, the infinite (re)tracing the figure “8” implies makes visible the eternal return of the same described by the self-sacrifice described above. Throughout the poem, the speaker continually “retraces” the intersection of life and death using different metaphors, making the poem itself a circuitous assemblage of circumlocutions. The speaker’s sinuous voyage is replete with repetitions and returns of all kinds. She “rediscovers” (*retrouver*) herself at a zenith or in close quarters; the infernal figure eight “comes back” (*revenir*) to lasso her; she leaves one circle only to fall again (*retomber*) into another; life again closes her in (*refermer*) with a lead seal. The best illustration of the eternal return described above, however, is the speaker’s winding path along the contours of the figure eight, which itself winds down the page:

Je me suis retrouvée  
toute enfermée  
comme en un cercle  
auquel j’échappe  
par cet autre  
qui m’y ramène

It is unclear where precisely the speaker “finds herself” (*se retrouver*) since she is both walled-in (*enfermée*), liberated (*échapper*), and brought back (*ramener*) at the same time. Her means of escape from one enclosed circle is another enclosed circle that yet returns her back to the former enclosed circle, and this circular journey away from where she was leads her back to where she was—back to “herself.” The French reflexive *se retrouver* captures the rich ambiguity of the speaker’s situation, which could be at once a “a meeting with oneself,” “a finding oneself back in some place,” a “finding one’s way,” an “ending up somewhere,” or a “rediscovering oneself.” The speaker rediscovers herself at the very place she sought flight, returning to herself at the very place she sought to evade. The language of loss and return, destination and

origin takes on vital connotations when, in subsequent lines, she refers to the annihilation (*s'anéantir*), life (*la vie*), mutilation (*mutilée*), and fatal signs (*signe fatal*) experienced in her voyage, which culminate in the final line quoted from a newspaper: "Un prisonnier s'évade en sautant le mur à l'endroit même où il devait être exécuté."<sup>32</sup> The speaker's passage around the figure eight is like the condemned prisoner who reclaims his life at a dead-end. Execution, as the statement implies, is not simply that which the prisoner evades but which rather serves as a site of life returned or regained at the point of death. The "escape" from life in execution or death signals the place at which life *also returns* to itself from death, at death, even *as* death. Death thus becomes the reconstituted as the "living dead."

For Laure, the gift of life therefore is given up *and* returned—given up *insofar* as it is returned—at the same time. The same gift is both given and returned, thus in effect exchanging "nothing." "Pas de transaction dans l'intégrité, la plénitude...la vie" she writes to Michel Leiris.<sup>33</sup> Yet this nothing is also a commodifiable "something," the in-valuable gift of no-thing itself, the nothing from which and to which life eternally returns and thereby becomes living action, the movement of life, an emancipation, a reason to live, the value of life, life in its plenitude: *bare life*. In this exchange of something-for-nothing, bare life is therefore deconstituted and reconstituted as a potential commodity, both exchanged and sacrificed in the paradoxical "movement" between a general and restricted economy. In Laure's evocation of the sacred, sacrificial expropriation of life in death is *also* the impossible (re)appropriation of that very life: life *qua* [the value of life [qua death]]. In her undead "trance" between the active resistance (*agir contre*) and the active embrace (*agir envers*) of those mortal hindrances to life arises the value of life itself—which is

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 92-3.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 263.

also death—and this value is the nothing-made-something, or something-made-nothing, life-death that is the sacred. The sacred is the life that is death that is the meaning, purpose, and condition of life. “Tout ce qui relève de la raison d’être est sacré pour moi,” writes Laure, “raison d’être encore, raison de vie, de mort.”<sup>34</sup>

*Natural Life.* The topos of vital transformation in Laure describes therefore contradictory power that creates and destroys identity (as destroyed and created) under the guise of life and death. This includes not only personal identity, but biological identity as well, evoking thereby a kind of radical naturalism. In her notes describing the sacred, she explains that gardens conjure states of anguished solitude and perceived infinity: “de même qu’au jardin, ce premier contact avec l’idée d’infini...a quelque chose de sacré, en ce sens que le jeu est accompagnée d’angoisse.”<sup>35</sup> In the garden, she imagines herself as part of a vital continuum; like the poem above in which plant and earth are presented as possible lives, the subject in the poem “8” finds itself at the intersection of life and death, at which it becomes simultaneously an eel (*anguille*), dolphin (*dauphin*), and earthworm (*ver de terre*).<sup>36</sup> Similar metamorphoses occur in Laure’s prose as well; in “Histoire d’une petite fille,” the narrator offers in a brief ekphrasis her first appreciation of nature vacationing in the countryside:

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 93.

J'appris à connaître les fleurs d'ombre et les fleurs d'eau, héliotropes et millepertuis, nénuphars et toutes sortes de roseaux. Je sus qu'il y avait des oiseux du soir et de la nuit, chauves-souris, hiboux, chouettes, chats-huants tombes du nid et noyés dans un seau hantèrent mes rêves. Un saule pleureur refermait sur moi ses feuilles lisses, une grotte m'accueillait dans sa fraîcheur humide avec un jeune chat aveugle cache dans ma robe et glissant sur ma poitrine. J'allais disparaître et m'évanouir entre le mur et le lierre. Là, je devenais araignée, faucheur, millepattes, hérisson, tout ce qu'on veut ou peut être même bête à bon dieu.<sup>37</sup>

Embroided in the spectacular natural scene surrounding her, the narrator undergoes an uncanny transformation that, through her fainting and disappearance, at once undoes her and prompts her rebirth as an insect or beast. Her morbid fainting (*s'évanouir*) and disappearance (*disparaître*) parallels the fallen, drowning screech owls (*chats-huants tombes/noyés*), other obscure birds of the night (*oiseux du soir et de la nuit*), and the blind cat (*chat aveugle*). In nature, she confronts the impasse of embodied consciousness much like the garden wall (*le mur*). And yet nature is also her deliverance; like the ivy, she sprawls, overcoming the wall and becoming everything around her, even the lady-bug (*bête à bon dieu*) which, as the French legend suggests, heralds divine grace and salvation.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>38</sup> According to French legend, the ladybug's more colorful name *bête à bon dieu* historically derives from the story of a condemned man's salvation in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Philippe Huet recounts this story thus: "Suite à l'assassinat à Paris d'un homme, son apprenti est soupçonné et condamné à mort malgré ses protestations. Condamné à avoir le coup tranché il y avait foule ce jour là pour assister à cette exécution. Lorsque le bourreau lève sa hanche, il aperçoit une coccinelle posée sur le coup du jeune homme. A première vue le bourreau ne pouvait se décider à trancher le cou du jeune homme, il enleva donc la coccinelle très délicatement et lorsqu'il relève sa hache quelle n'est pas sa surprise de constater que la coccinelle était de retour sur le cou de ce pauvre jeune homme. Le bourreau eut beau insister, mais la coccinelle était obstinée, au point que le roi d'alors (Robert le Pieux) intervint et souligna que la coccinelle accomplissait là une mission divine et qu'il s'agissait d'un miracle. On gracia le jeune homme, et quelques jours plus tard le véritable coupable fut découvert. Dès lors les gens de Paris parlaient de la 'beste du bon Dieu' et plus personne ne pensait à écraser ce petit insecte sans que cela apparaisse comme un sacrilège." See Philippe Huet, *La Coccinelle ou la véritable histoire de la bête à bon Dieu*. Editions de Terran, 2004. The excerpt here derives from the entry « La coccinelle » from the website of the Musée de zoologie, Lausanne, [http://www.zoologie.vd.ch/1\\_actualite/Le\\_Matin\\_DCh/AcDCh02\\_01\\_05.html](http://www.zoologie.vd.ch/1_actualite/Le_Matin_DCh/AcDCh02_01_05.html) (accessed July 14th 2006). That Laure becomes a *bête à bon dieu*, therefore, figuratively places her on the executioner's block, that sacred and criminal threshold between life and death, salvation and damnation, subjection and emancipation.

In Laure's oeuvre, this "movement" from life to death (and back) is frequently associated with nature, which signifies less a bucolic Rousseauian serenity than a kind of violent Spinozian cycle between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*. This cycle, in turn, is not unlike the macabre qualities of nature found in later French literary history of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. What Charles Bernheimer has called the "decadent naturalism" of the 19<sup>th</sup> century illustrates this trend, which finds some of its modernist residues in French surrealism and its dispossessed figures, including Laure. Not to be confused with the classical naturalism of Emile Zola and Guy de Maupassant, Bernheimer's term refers to a virulent nature for which "all of life is in movement, in heat, close to explosion, filling up empty space, generating ever-new growth." Such nature, Bernheimer elaborates, "cares nothing for...individuality and the desire to endure. Death is nature's gift to the fermentation of life."<sup>39</sup> While certainly a rejection of romantic nature *à la* Victor Hugo and Chateaubriand, it is also an exaggeration of nature's inherent cruelty and indifference found in traditional naturalist literature. In this vein, the imagery of forests, trees, flowers, mountains, prairies, and beasts in Laure frequently signifies a morbid transformation both fearsome and fascinating. Such transformation testifies to a kind of "natural force" of becoming between life and death that precludes self-identity. "Où est l'accord profond entre soi-même et tous les instants de la vie?" Laure asks, "Etre non conforme / spontanément...naturellement / force naturelle comme une force de la nature."<sup>40</sup>

What is perhaps the best illustration of nature to be found in Laure's oeuvre is not literary, but visual. Found among Laure's manuscripts was one of André Masson's

<sup>39</sup> Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects : The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the fin de siècle in Europe*, ed. T. Jefferson Kline and Naomi Schor (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 56-7. Bernheimer's study makes daring connections between and among the logics of naturalism, decadence, and modernism using the figure of a violent nature as a common thread. He places Bataille's eroticism, for example, alongside Octave Mirbeau's in *Le jardin des supplices* (1899). Curiously absent from his study, however, is Sade and Spinoza, who are among the first to elaborate the virulent conception of nature found in this later literary history (see note 40).

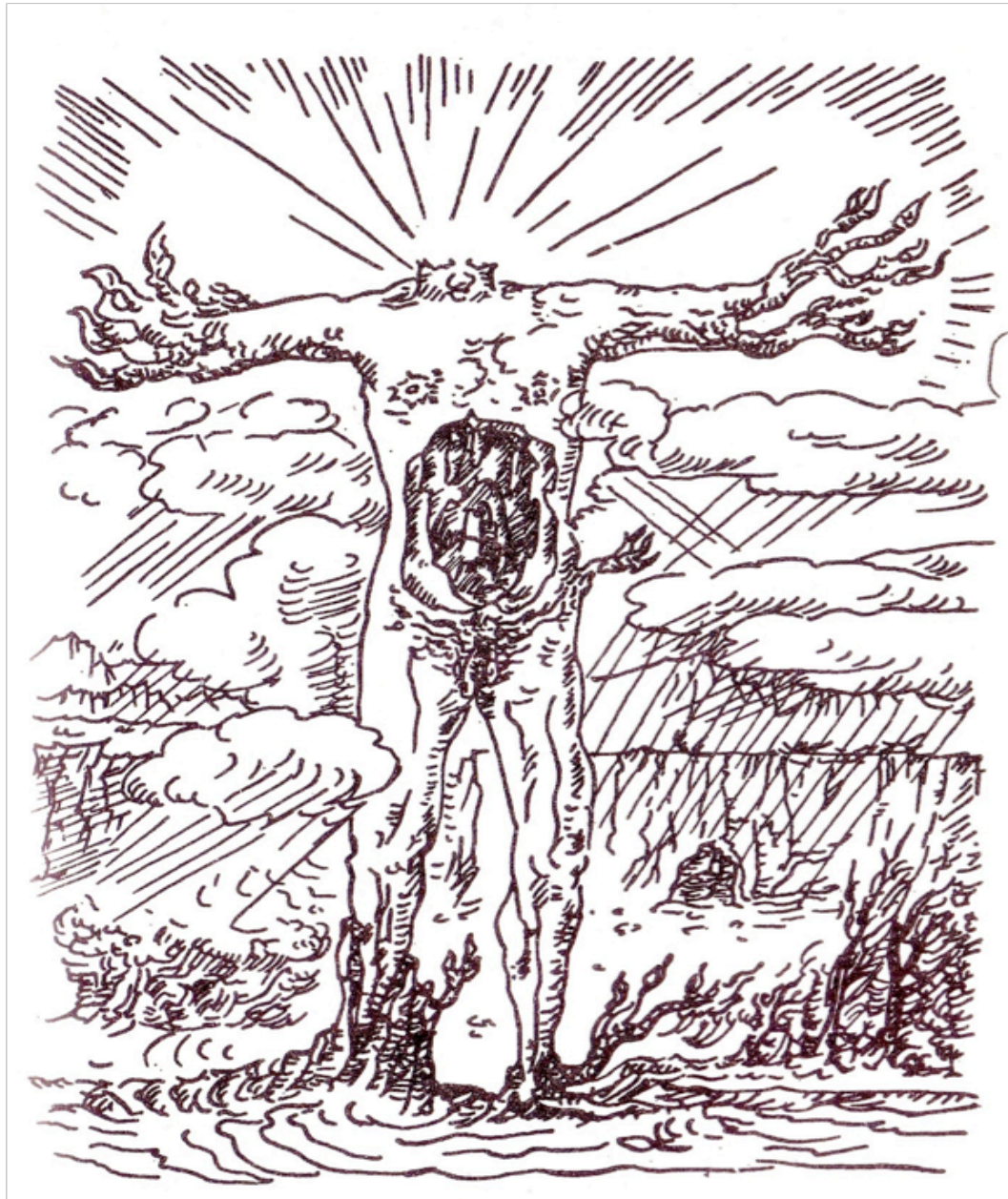
<sup>40</sup> Laure and Peignot, *Écrits de Laure*, 158.

many sketches of the acéphale man, which presumably derives from Bataille's first "mystical" experience, recounted in his notes for *Le bleu du ciel*.<sup>41</sup> Each of Masson's sketches in the series is unique, emphasizing a particular thematic or metaphor associated with the Acéphale group, but Laure's is exemplary in its graphic and violent depiction of nature (**Figures 3.1-3.3**). Against a mythic, Zarathustrian backdrop of mountains and abyss, the figure, beheaded and eviscerated, stands with his arboreal extremities reaching from earth to sky. A turbulent storm surrounds him from above, and from below, a marshy earth seems at once to germinate and envelop him. He stands in the center of an animated, violent world that passes around him and through him. Traversing fertile earth and stormy sky, high mountain and dark abyss, inner body and outer world, Masson's figure crosses many thresholds; indeed, the acephale man is the threshold *par excellence*, being at once constituted and deconstituted by the virulent forces of nature around and within. If nature is his origin, it is also his mortal end,

Lorsange like many Sadean protagonists advances a philosophy of nature based upon criminality and transgression. As that which mobilizes both the cruelest and noblest human sentiments, he explains (echoing the classic philosophical distinction between *nomos* and *physis*) that nature's dynamism defies the dichotomizing of legal or religious interdictions. In an attempt to assuage the timid Thérèse's disquiet about his radical propositions, Lorsange says "Ah ! Tranquillise-toi, chère fille, nous n'éprouvons rien qui ne lui serve ; tous les mouvements qu'elle place en nous sont les organes de ses lois ; les passions de l'homme ne sont que les moyens qu'elle emploie pour parvenir à ses desseins."<sup>42</sup> In other words, human passions are the

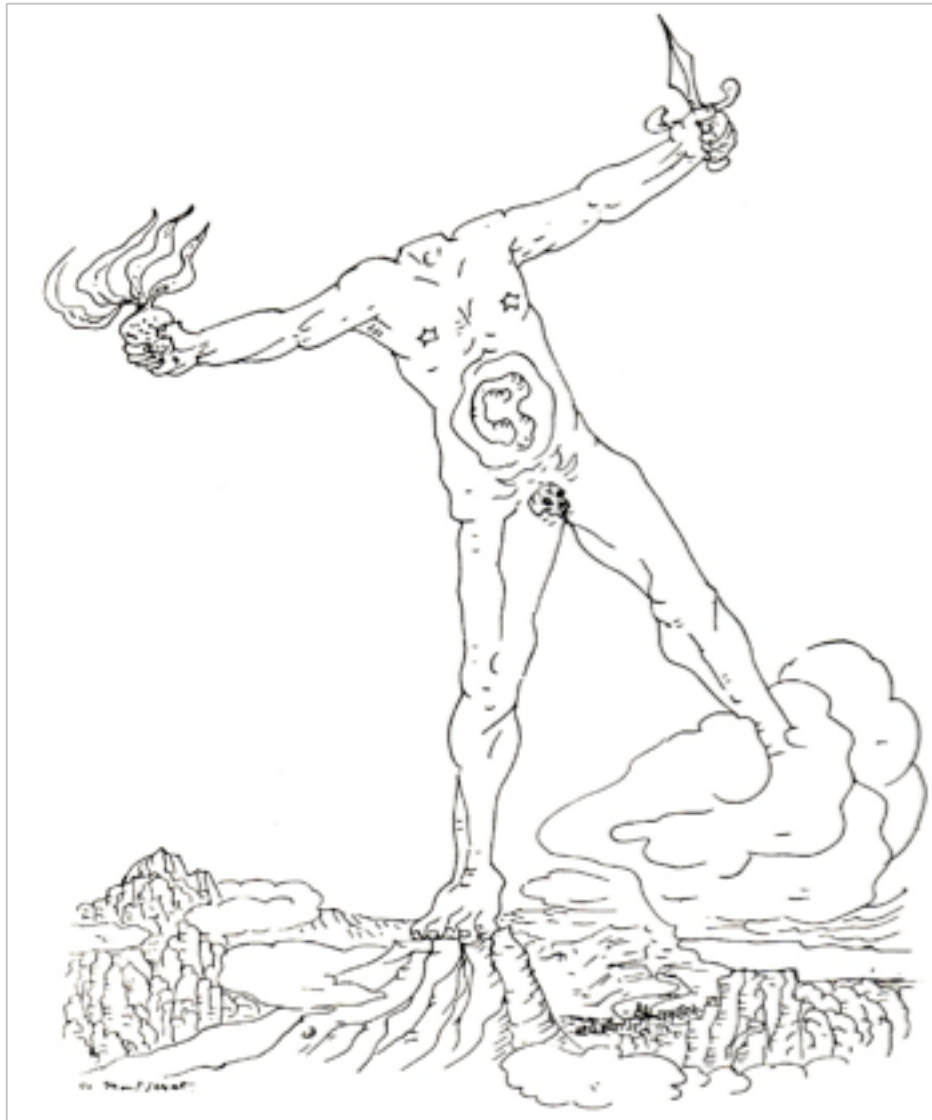
<sup>41</sup> The source for Masson's drawing, and indeed Laure's literary description, is most likely the powerful mystical experience Bataille recounts in his notes *Les larmes d'eros*, where he envisions himself as a swollen penis on the verge of a "torturous" yet "voluptuous" ejaculation. Bataille takes this to be a metaphor for ecstasy and self-obliteration of the (phallic) ego. See Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 5 : 517 and vol. 4:165-66.

<sup>42</sup> D.A.F. de Sade, *Justine, ou, les malheurs de la vertu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 134.



**Figure 3.1.** André Masson, *Untitled*. (Sketch of acephale man found among Laure's manuscripts). "Comme s'il implantait dans la terre / par le / mouvement / retrouvant / force de pesanteur / corps détaché de tous les lois physiques."





**Figure 3.2.** André Masson, *Untitled*. (Illustration for “Acephale, Nietzsche et les fascistes,” January 21st, 1937). The figure bridges earth and sky, recalling Nietzsche’s Zarathustra: “Verily...once you have recognized the need and land and sky and neighbor of a people you may also guess the law of their overcomings.”



**Figure 3.3.** André Masson, *Untitled*. (Illustration for “Acephale: Dionysus,” July 1937). This illustration figures the acephale man as a Dionysian character (wine, grapes, serpents, etc.) placed within a hellenic setting.

vehicle through which nature realizes its own inhuman ends. Lorsange continues, explaining that such passions express these naturally wayward “movements” which, properly manifested, take the form of crime: “La première et la plus belle qualité de la nature,” says Sade, “est le *mouvement* qui l'agite sans cesse, mais ce mouvement n'est qu'une suite perpétuelle de crimes, ce n'est que par des crimes qu'elle le conserve.”<sup>43</sup> This conception of nature remains consistent throughout Sade’s oeuvre; again, in *Philosophie dans le boudoir*, Dolmancé compares the animation of nature to a static, foolish, and powerless God. Of nature, he says, “action perpétuelle et une de ses lois,” and such action continues of its own accord quite independently of man’s appreciation or God will: “la nature, toujours en action, toujours en mouvement, tient d'elle-même ce qu'il plaît aux sots de lui donner gratuitement.”<sup>44</sup> For Sade, nature overturns the limits of justice, virtue, and law in its inherent exigency to move beyond them, indeed beyond everything, including the laws of nature themselves. In essence, Sade’s movement of nature is the movement of nature beyond itself.

In *Sade, mon prochain*, Pierre Klossowski explores this paradox in depth. For Klossowski, the “perpetual movement” of Sade’s nature presents a double-bind wherein nature submits to its own law through defying it. “Le mouvement perpétuel est aveugle,” he writes, “mais l’aspiration à échapper aux lois de ce mouvement (par les bouleversement des crimes), n’est que la prise de conscience de ce mouvement.”<sup>45</sup> Nature’s perpetual movement is at once its law and liberation; the “movement” of criminal escape from natural laws itself reifies the natural law of perpetual movement, making natural law thus also the emancipation from natural law: “Sans doute Sade

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> ———, *La philosophie dans le boudoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 67-8.

<sup>45</sup> Pierre Klossowski, *Sade mon prochain*, 1st ed. (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1947), 84.

espère-t-il, à l’instar de cette Nature,” Klossowski writes, “esclave de ses lois, sa libération totale.”<sup>46</sup> It is not that lawful servitude opposes criminal liberation in nature, but rather that law and liberation are differing effects of a common “natural” potential —“sa plus active puissance” to use Klossowski’s terms—beyond both law and crime. Drawing upon Klossowski’s analysis, Gilles Deleuze usefully distinguishes between a “primary” and “secondary” nature in Sade: secondary nature refers essentially to finite nature, nature as limit. This is nature directed toward an order, goal, or end, such as in conservation, reproduction, or other principles of natural law. Yet secondary nature is only a residual effect of nature in its primary form, understood as an infinite negativity that exceeds law and limits as a form of pure becoming. This pure negation, “chaos,” (*chaos*) or “originary delirium” (*délire originel*) as Deleuze terms it, however, can manifest itself only through a more sober finitude found in the form of secondary nature.<sup>47</sup> Primary and secondary nature are therefore not two different natures, nor even two different modes of nature, but nature’s own self-differentiation in and through its “perpetual movement” between an inexhaustible, infinite potentiality and a (humanly) constrained finitude. Therefore the law of nature is also the crime of nature; nature’s subjection (*esclave*) is also its emancipation (*libération totale*); nature’s revealing is also nature hiding; the blindness of nature (*aveugle*) is also its awareness (*prise de conscience*). One might say in Klossowski’s terms that secondary nature is a “simulacrum” of nature in its primary form, or (perhaps more simply) that nature in Sade is a simulacrum of itself, the copy of an irreproducible original, or an original found to be originally a copy. In other words, in Sade, for nature to be what it is, it must also be what it is not.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Leopold Sacher-Masoch, *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch, le froid et le cruel, avec le texte intégral de la Vénus à la fourrure* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1967), 24-5.

By extension, the products of nature are also not what they are. Flora and fauna, man and beast are mere simulacra of the bare living potential that inheres in nature's perpetual movement. They remain mere "transmutations" or "formal changes" (*changements de forme*) in this movement, as Sade's Chevalier mentions in *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*. Skeptically, the Chevalier asks "Qu'est-ce l'homme, et quelle différence y a-t-il entre lui et les autres plantes, entre lui et tous les autres animaux de la nature? Aucune assurément."<sup>48</sup> Death is the repetitious reincarnation of a life (that is to die) as plant, animal, or insect—or, for that matter, Laure's ivy, earthworm, and ladybug. Like the Chevalier, Laure's poetics of nature suggests that these are all part of nature's movement as iterations, manifestations of the same living potential, signifiers for the same signified (ivy=earthworm=ladybug). Yet the iteration itself betrays a difference *internal* to nature that precludes their common identity in or as nature itself. If they are "identical" at all, it is only because ivy, earthworm, and ladybug already differ from themselves (ivy≠ivy, earthworm≠earthworm, ladybug≠ladybug) in a natural movement that *ad seriatim* compels dis-identification into something else (ivy=earthworm=ladybug) in its own movement of becoming. Nature is thus this power to become what it is though becoming also what it is *not*.

***Sacrifice, Crime, and Class.*** To speak of nature's inexhaustible potential is another way to speak of nature's infinite power (L. *potens*). As the case of nature suggests, the representation and effects of power are varied and multiple in Laure; power is represented at once as law and crime, despotism and rebellion. In *Le Sacré*, for example, poems possessing a quasi-fascist veneration of state authority are

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<sup>48</sup> Sade, *La philosophie dans le boudoir*, 238. He continues: "ce que nous appelons la fin de l'animal qui a vie ne sera plus une fin réelle, mais une simple transmutation, dont est la base le mouvement perpétuel, véritable essence de la matière et que tous les philosophes modernes admettent comme une de ses premières lois. La mort, d'après ces principes irréfutables, n'est donc plus qu'un changement de forme, qu'un passage imperceptible d'une existence à une autre, et voilà ce que Pythagore appelait la métempsychose."

grouped with others embracing sedition and revolt.<sup>49</sup> This again recalls Sade's conception of Nature, which enables both institutional corruption and anti-institutional rebellion.

Sade vividly illustrates the ubiquitous efforts of human law to exert control over the unwieldy influence of Nature hidden but always operative in civilization, usually in the form of a civil oppression or corruption. Such are the indulgences and injustices of Sade's clergy and aristocracy; their "civility" betrays a greater, natural incivility, one that actively defies civilization rather than submissively obeying and, as such, reveals civilization itself to be a kind of "crime against nature." This corruption of civilization, however, *also* ironically reveals the inexorable operation of nature within culture: the criminality of human law (*nomos*) ironically weds it to Nature's own more fundamental "criminality" or *anomie*, that primordial effulgence of life, death, growth, and decay that acknowledges no laws or bounds and therefore constitutes a continual state of crime, "une suite perpétuelle de crimes." If, in Sade, the stasis of human law defies Nature, the movement of Nature both defies and defies this defiance. The criminality of nature for Sade, therefore, is not merely the self-violation of Nature *against* herself; it is a self-violation *with* and *for* herself as well. Nature, as a dynamic power of continual motion and change, always already implies self-violation in the act of moving beyond herself. If Nature is "agitated" by movement (*le mouvement qui l'agite*) as the Marquis de Lorsange says, it is because nature is torn between herself and herself, being at once the perpetrator and the victim of her own crime. This criminal momentum, this torturous agitation, however, is also her deliverance and self-realization insofar as Nature is *sine qua non* this very momentum,

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<sup>49</sup> Here it is necessary to mention that the organization of the various texts in *Le Sacré* were entirely subject to the editorial whim of Bataille who, against the wishes of Laure's father, Charles Peignot, charged himself with the duty of editing and publishing her writings as a manuscript. For more on Laure's biography and the history of this manuscript, see the correspondence among Bataille, Leiris, and Peignot in Laure et al., *Une rupture 1934 : correspondances croisées de Laure avec Boris Souvarine, sa famille, Georges Bataille, Pierre et Jenny Pascal, Simone Weil*, 167-81.

this very crime. Life becomes what it is through violating it is. Nature's law (*physis*) is to be criminal, and her crime is to be lawful. For both Laure and Sade, one might say in philosophical terms that *anomie* is the *nomos* of *physis*: Nature or "life" traces an aporetic limit between interdiction and violation, law and crime wherein one paradoxically and commensurately realizes the other. Both and neither guilty (n)or innocent before its own law, nature occupies a marginal, *sovereign* space that is at once beholden to and beyond the law in an eternal struggle with itself.

Like Sade's nature, the speaking subjects of Laure's poems turns traitorously inward. "Vivre en face de sa lutte intérieure," she writes. This subject lives as a crime against itself, just as all of nature is a crime against itself; the coincidence of law and crime, authority and resistance presents a form of struggle not unlike her own as advocate (and skeptic) of the French Left. Yet such coincidences suggest that the struggle for power is not simply a Manichean antagonism of dueling interests, desires, or parties as understood in normative politics and class struggle. Rather, they exhibit the paradoxical power inherent to the subject *itself* as a site of power. The political struggle *for* power in Laure's writings is, in other words, the struggle *of* power inherent in the condition of subjection. Subject to those powers that call the viability of subject's life into question—God, law, nature, the state, etc.—the subject nevertheless acquires a certain power of its own that enables it's very becoming. In this way, the speaking subject of Laure's poetry is always, at least in part, beyond the law in submission to the law.

Crime in Laure's poetry traverses a threshold therefore between self-realization and self-undoing for which the body serves as frequent and appropriate metaphor. The body not only traces the corporeal limit between life and death, but the juridical limit of the legal and the illegal. As Laure and other members of the College of Sociology knew, laws and taboos were originally safeguards against sickness and death,

protecting the body of the person as well as the “body politic” of the tribe. The body, in effect is the law *par excellence*: “ton corps/c’est ta Loi.”<sup>50</sup> That which either invigorates or destroys the body figuratively represents a place of transgression, a crime site. In a letter written to her sister-in-law Suzanne in the 1920s, Laure writes “Tu n’imagines pas la joie folle de chaque seconde que j’éprouve à constater mes forces entières depuis cet été seulement et je voudrais briser mon corps par mille efforts...Ainsi nous pouvons briser toutes les barrières, nous sommes encore limités.”<sup>51</sup> Her invigorating (*mes forces*), joyful (*joie*) summer is empowering not because it reconstitutes the body, but because it overpowers crude barriers (*barrières, limités*) like the body. She therefore would like to “break out” (*briser*) of her body through forceful activities. Liberation from the body is a liberation from all limits, limitation, the law itself; it is a “corps détaché de toutes les lois.”<sup>52</sup>

Such transgressions describe therefore a journey that delivers the subject over to a criminal alterity, death, and the non-identical. If any identity is to be found on this journey, it is always returned to or (re)discovered in a place far and away; in a letter to Michel Leiris, she writes “La vie va toujours plus loin—elle se retrouve—ailleurs—la même.”<sup>53</sup> In parallel to this statement, the following prose-poem announces an ambiguous adventure and return:

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<sup>50</sup> Laure, *Ecrits retrouvés*, 84.

<sup>51</sup> Laure and Peignot, *Écrits de Laure*, 12.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.



et si les malheurs  
ou l'extrême malheur  
arrive c'est qu'il me sera nécessaire  
pour me réaliser  
pour aller plus loin  
toujours plus loin  
et ils parlent de CRIME!<sup>54</sup>

The precise nature of the crime and misfortune (*malheur*) remains unclear. The misfortune could be that of a martyr or convict's lament; the "crime" described could be that of a virtuous revolutionary or that of a common thief. Whatever the case, the crime and misfortune enable the speaker to continually transgress a threshold of self-becoming (*pour me réaliser*), and this threshold is analogous, if not directly related, to the juridical threshold of legality (*crime*) and the "subjective" threshold of well-being (*malheur*). She therefore does not lament her misfortune in crime but, through a forceful parataxis, exclaims a kind of empowering self-discovery.

If each step forward is a "new crime" figuratively speaking, the previous step, as part of a series of such steps, is no less criminal, making the journey the subject describes is less a voyage from law to crime than a incessant and continual trespass from crime to crime. Transgression here becomes the rule rather than the exception—indeed, the exception becomes the rule—and crime becomes the "law" itself. This incessant transgression reveals the curious paradox by which the law imposes itself through a prior crime, thus revealing the original criminality of the law criminally transgressed. The coincidence of law and crime in this eternally transgressive movement is analogous to the coincidence of selfhood and otherness in the subject's onward journey. Being always elsewhere, always beyond, the law of this journey toward self-identity is a crime itself, even a crime to itself; yet as that which is non-identical to itself, its "criminality" is thus also part of its "law." Between both law and

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 118.

crime, beyond both law and crime, the subject can deny the crime it commits, even deny the crime as crime, since crime permits by definition its very own self-violation. Thus, a subsequent poem from *Le sacré* reads: “La plus grande force / accomplir une crime / avec la certitude de le nier / devant tout le monde.” To violate the law in crime (*accomplir une crime*) is thus less powerful (*force*) than to deny the crime is a crime; such a denial implies the subject’s own position beyond the law in redefining the law itself. A crime is not a crime since the “true” crime both permits and denies its own criminality. Echoing the confrontation described above, the struggle to go ever further, to cross thresholds that dare not be crossed, expresses here the paradoxical sovereignty of the criminal and fortune of the unfortunate: “Victime / ou coupable / Comment dire?”<sup>55</sup>

In contrast to the triumph of crime, the speaker in the preceding poem pleads for a Machiavellian prince, singular in his power and authority. Such an ennobling authority seems necessary in a life devoid of value and meaning:

Vivre? Plus de sens plus de critère.  
 Il faut bien introduire une valeur.  
 (Soi) s’imposer? Il faut être *Machiavel*.  
 Au nom de *quelles* valeurs?  
 Il faut rétablir *une* autorité  
 Accuser avec mépris  
 (un mépris définitive, qui claque comme une porte)  
 le faible.<sup>56</sup>

As opposed to the weak person (*le faible*), those deserving of contempt (*mépris*), a Machiavellian prince would presumably have the authority to prescribe values (*Il faut*) and attribute to life its lost meaning (*plus de sens*). Life, in other words, acquires

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 117. Author’s emphasis. Machiavelli is a frequent albeit ironic figure for power and authority in Laure’s writings (see *Ecrits*, 176-179). He is frequently juxtaposed with God and Christ as a figure of shifting power. One should note that Machiavelli had, out of dutiful subservience, given the Medicis the “power” of power over Italian principalities with *The Prince*.

meaning and value only on the prior condition of subjection. Whereas the prince in his majesty establishes the value of life, the weak are subjected to his authority and values (*rétablir une autorité*). Thus subjected, however, the weak subject's life nevertheless becomes endowed with the meaning and majesty formerly unique to the prince. When the prince affords the subject a nascent reason for life, the subject thereby acquires a life-value that hitherto did not exist. A certain exchange of value takes place in which the subject acquires the value and authority of the prince to which it is subject. In other words, the subject at least in part *becomes* the prince. The poem itself manifests this curious reversal. The subject in the poem is ironically subjected to none other than itself: the subject itself says *il faut*, and it is the one who introduces the value and authority of value and authority themselves. It is therefore both the strong and the weak, the prince and the subject—and yet neither—in the poem's contradictory pronouncement of power. Life (*vivre?*) and self-empowerment (*s'imposer?*) remain very much in question: is this life or power that of either, both, or neither the prince and/the subject? Given these differing vectors of power, it remains unclear whether life has *more* meaning or *no more* meaning (*plus de sens plus de critère*) for the speaker. Though a life without apparent value defeats the purpose for living, it nevertheless makes possible the creative revaluation of all values, and thus the (re)affirmation of life. As both the subject of and the subject to its own law, as both the condition of and for the law, the subjects in the two poems above can thus neither indict nor justify themselves. “Vivre enfin” is thus to live, as Laure writes elsewhere, “sans s'accuser / ni se justifier.”<sup>57</sup>

As these poems illustrate, the sovereign and the subject, like the prince and the criminal, are two sides of the same coin. They commonly occupy the very same juridical space “beyond the law” that yet constitutes the law as such. Likewise, they

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 146.

violate a mortal threshold that nevertheless makes life itself possible. This is the space of *sovereignty*, which, overturning the difference between the juridical and biological, is not unrelated to revolution, nature, or the sacred in Laure. In a loosely organized text entitled “D’où viens-tu?” for example, the speaking subject finds the “singular value” (*c’est la seule valeur*) of “prestige” among rotting sewers, cadavers, and dung, there where flowers, funeral wreaths, and *crowns* (*couronnes*) are found.<sup>58</sup> Again echoing Blake from “Proverbs from Hell,” death and degeneration here herald the advent of new lives, but with these new lives (in death) also comes the singular value and prestige of sovereignty.

As explained in Chapter One, the classical notion sovereignty inheres in the sovereign’s decision to put his subjects to death without legal consequence. Of the sovereign, Foucault writes for example that “sans ‘se proposer directement leur mort,’ il lui est licite d’exposer leur vie.”<sup>59</sup> Similarly, Hobbes (whom Foucault implies) writes that “Whatsoever [the Sovereign] doth can be no injury to any of his subjects; nor ought he to be by any of them accused of injustice.”<sup>60</sup> Sovereignty, they explain, evolved from the Roman law of *patria potestas* that permitted the *pater familias* to take life, and thereby obversely grant the “prior” right to life.<sup>61</sup> Through the strange causal inversion effected by the logic of the *patria potestas*, the life of the subject is never opposed or free from death, but contrarily becomes possible through a prior possibility of death at the hand of the sovereign. This suggests that subject’s life

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>59</sup> Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 177.

<sup>60</sup> Thomas Hobbes, Richard E. Flathman, and David Johnston, *Leviathan : Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Interpretations*, Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 1997), XVIII.

<sup>61</sup> Hobbes states in *Leviathan* XVII that “attaining to this sovereign power is [done] by two ways. One, by natural force: as when a man maketh his children to submit themselves, and their children, to his government, as being able to destroy them if they refuse; or by war subdueth his enemies to his will, giving them their lives on that condition.” See Chapter One for more on Hobbesian sovereignty and its reception in Foucault, Agamben, and Schmitt.

depends on the precondition of a death suspended, deferred, or refused—but never entirely removed. Such a subject is therefore always already tethered to death as a power that paradoxically enables its life. Under the power of the sovereign, the subject's potential to live is thus also its potential to die. If the sacred describes a certain power able to mediate between life and death, flowers and cadavers, etc., than this power is the very same conferred upon the sovereign who decides the fate of the subject. The subject, in its turn, “embodies” this sacred mediation as a life lived in and through death and, by extension, in and through the sovereign.

Yet the sovereign's decision does not merely distinguish him from his subjects or life from death; it also suggests a prior state wherein life and death, as well as the identities of the sovereign and his subjects, are undetermined. If his decision is the *sine qua non* condition of the sovereign's power and, by extension, the subject's existence, an antecedent “communal” situation is implied wherein the sovereign and his subjects are undifferentiated before the decision, before the life (or death) that the sovereign bestows. In this state, the potential sovereign and his potential subject are both “alive and dead,” suspended within a prior communal state of “indecision” and pure *potential* to decide. In other words, before the sovereign had subjects, he was *himself* a subject in a certain sense, subjected to the decisive condition “beyond” his power—i.e., the *conferral* of decision, subjects, and the state—that nevertheless constitutes the power presumed unique and original to him. This prior condition reveals that the sovereign was originally not what he is, that he is an *effect* of an

impossible prior cause, an “other life” that he himself did not bestow, indeed a prior “sovereign plurality” that compromises his sovereign unity.<sup>62</sup>

Sovereignty in this more “pluralized” sense broaches Bataille’s own notion of sovereignty, which he would more fully elaborate several years after Laure’s death. Unlike the notion Carl Schmitt advances, Bataillan sovereignty resides not in the exceptional power of a single agent, but rather in the deliverance of human existence from instrumentality and work, which reduce it to a state of “servile objects” (*des objets serviles*). So delivered, existence remains sovereign insofar as it maintains a certain disindividualized “generality” and, more importantly, *shares* this generalized state with others. Contrary to “traditional sovereignty” (*souveraineté traditionnelle*) which implies the exceptional (*l’exception*) state of a singular subject (*un sujet seul*), Bataille’s subject “maintenant la valeur souveraine opposée à la subordination de l’objet possède cette valeur *en partage* avec tous les hommes. C’est l’homme *en général*, dont l’existence participe nécessairement du sujet, qui s’oppose en générale aux choses.”<sup>63</sup> For Bataille, sovereignty implies a state of multiplicity secretly inhering in the presumed singularity of the subject, one acquired through self-sacrificial experiences, eroticism, and death.

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<sup>62</sup> In his essay on the “caractère sacré du pouvoir” in *L’homme et le sacré*, Roger Caillois will insist on this precise fact. “Il importait d’insister,” he writes, “sur ce paradoxe du pouvoir, sur l’originalité essentielle du rapport qui unit le dominé au dominateur” (Caillois, *L’homme et le sacré*, 118). Likewise, in his voluminous study of medieval political theology, *The King’s Two Bodies*, Ernst Kantorowicz shows how sovereignty implies a paradox between the singular and multiple. He claims that the sovereign always possesses two bodies, the “Body mortal” and the “Body politic.” Whereas the first refers to his passions, desires, and mortal limitations, the second refers to a transcendent *corpus mysticum* unifying all subjects under the state. These two bodies, he argues, are reconciled in “the Crown” which at once was “the embodiment of all sovereign rights—within the realm and without—of the whole body politic” and yet “a composite body, an aggregate of the king and those responsible for maintaining the inalienable rights of the Crown and kingdom.” The traversal between the singular and multiple described by the Crown create the paradox whereby the sovereign could be one and many at the same time. See Ernst Hartwig Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 381.

<sup>63</sup> Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 8, 285.

Laure's poem captures the multiplicity implied in Bataille's notion of sovereignty. As the reciprocal repetition of command and self-questioning (*il faut / s'imposer?*) suggests, sovereignty here inheres in the *repeated act of decision*, the act that severs (L. *de-cidere*) selfhood from otherness, the particular from the general, life from death--and thereby multiplies them. Decision is, in other words, the *performative condition* of the sovereign's identity, one that must be reiterated to re-establish "his" authority (*rétablir une autorité*) over and against the subjects that he creates and on which he depends. Thus the necessity of decision, the repeated *il faut* of Laure's sovereign, the "transgressive" returns of her subjects (*ramener, revenir*, etc.). Insofar as he decides, the sovereign constitutes his identity as sovereign and, by extension, the identity of the subjects subject to his authority and values. And these subjects, in their turn, assume the authority and value that make them subjects--as *part of* the sovereign's plurality. In essence, the sovereign decision decides identity *itself*. In *La part maudite*, for example, Bataille writes appropriately that the sovereign "n'ignore pas moins les limites de l'identité que celles de la mort, ou plutôt ces limites sont les mêmes, il est la transgression des unes et des autres."<sup>64</sup>

Thus Laure's frequent conflation of God, Machiavelli, and even Bataille as sovereign figures. In different ways, all of them subvert self-identity and the limit

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<sup>64</sup> Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 8, 270. Bataille's theory of sovereignty in *La part maudite* is unique in that it insists on the transgressive, "outlaw" aspects of sovereignty rather than its foundational or constitutive aspects, those that traditional theories (like Hobbes') insist upon. Some have called Bataille's sovereignty thus an "anti-sovereignty," since it resists all political application. As explained in Chapter One, for Carl Schmitt, this is only one side of the story. In his *Politische Theologie* (1922) the "sovereign decision" to exempt himself (or others) from the law constitutes a "state of exception," an outlaw space analogous to crime and transgression. This outlaw space nevertheless constitutes the boundary of law, an outside and an inside; as a "borderline concept" (*Grenzbegriff*) it retains both the transgressive (outside) and foundational (inside) aspects of sovereignty. Jacques Derrida—though elsewhere extremely critical of Schmitt—agrees in *La force de la loi* that the power (i.e., violence) that grounds law is also what suspends law, i.e., that the power of law is found in the "right" (*droit*) to exclude oneself from the law. In *Voyous* (2003), Derrida elaborates sovereignty in relation to subjectivity, power, and hospitality, claiming that it nominates a potency found "in every 'I can' – the *pse* of the *ipse* (*ipsissimus*)" (Jacques Derrida, *Voyous : deux essais sur la raison* [Paris: Galilée, 2003], 31). Despite Laure's close relationship to Bataille, the latter account of sovereignty seems more accurate for her (if not in general) in accounting for the various iterations of power—nature, self-sacrifice, will to power, etc.—as "limited" accounts of unlimited transgression.

between life and death. In three contiguous poems, for example, she concatenates the three, almost as if they were iterations of the same like ivy, earthworm, and ladybug: “Christ...Machiavel...Dieu”; “Bataille / Remplacer Dieu / Le Dieu / Machiavel”; and “Machiavel / Dieu / Nevrose.” The sovereign *par excellence* for Laure, however, is Christ, though her veneration and understanding of him are far from those of normative Christianity.<sup>65</sup> For Laure, Christ is more of a contradiction than a savior. He is a criminal and yet a king, dead and yet alive, alive as “he who died” for others. In what seems to be a brief note for a letter to be addressed to André Masson, Laure describes the significance of one of Titian’s *Ecce Homo* paintings (**Figures 3.4, 3.5**).<sup>66</sup> Noticeable in her brief note on the painting is the significance of the figure’s lividity and the regalia mocking him as king of the Jews. While his pallid face makes him morbidly weak, his “reed scepter” (*scepter de Roseau*) and crown of thorns suggest for Laure neither meekness nor mockery but magnitude—indeed the “greatest strength and force”—repeating immediately below her statement from *Le Sacré*: “la plus grande force [sic] accomplir une crime avec la certitude de le nier devant tout le monde.” She embellishes on the title when says (implicating Nietzsche) that Titian’s Christ constitutes a “true *Ecce Homo*” (*un véritable Ecce Homo*). This strange grouping of Nietzschean (over)man with Christ, God, and Machiavelli suggests an

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<sup>65</sup> In *Le Sacré* Laure mentions that her goal is to destroy the saccharine understandings of death and sacrifice found in normative Christianity. “But: détruire l’esprit chrétien et ses équivalences” (Laure and Peignot, *Écrits de Laure*, 122). She rather associates Christ at once with death, eroticism, and a vehement nature, again making Him a figure for transgression and the limits of subjectivity (continued):

Cela doit être bien irritant ce ver rongeur, soursnois qui scie les heures  
 Une chienne aux abois hurle à la lune  
 (...)
 Petit Jésus je vous donne mon cœur  
 La grange toute effritée  
 (...)
 la petite fille est là  
 qui se branle  
 dans le foin.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. See Pontius Pilate’s presentation of Jesus in John 19:5. Titian did a large series of these paintings in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century; some offer a depiction of the crowd during Jesus’ presentation while others focus on the condemned Jesus himself.





**Figure 3.4.** Titian, *Ecce Homo*. 1548. Oil on slate. Museo del Prado, Madrid. Image taken from [www.abcgallery.com](http://www.abcgallery.com).



**Figure 3.5.** Titian (?), *Ecce Homo*. 1547-1550. Oil on canvas. Museo del Prado, Madrid. Image taken from [www.savevenice.org](http://www.savevenice.org). Provenance of painting is unknown; attributed to Titian's workshop of the late 1540s.

“overcoming” or revaluation of Christ’s subjection as a form of sovereignty: if the crown, robe, and scepter are an ignominious parody of nobility, they are so only because the parody suggests an unlikely coupling at which the noble and ignoble converge. The thorns and reed signify that Jesus is the imposter king, the “king” identified as “non-king,” the king that is not who he is; though crucified like a murderous Barabas, he offers eternal life and the kingdom of heaven; though he dies a criminal, his death permits his divine rebirth; though he is murdered, he is also sacrificed for sin. In effect, Christ personifies the paradox of sovereignty itself, insofar as he occupies both sides of the limit that divides life from death, the lawful from the criminal, the sovereign God from the servile subject.

Like Titian’s Christ, Laure’s poetic subjects commonly find themselves in precarious positions of empowerment and disempowerment. Neither perpetrator nor victim, neither servile nor sovereign—and yet both—they consistently overturn the hierarchies of power implied in normative understandings of law, sovereignty, and servitude through a constant *performative* repositioning of their self-identity. The potential of the subject to perform what it is, i.e., the power to become *other* than it is paradoxically through the constraint of being what it is, describes the very same power and potential proper to the sacred. Like the sovereign who’s power is and is not his own, or like the creature who’s life is and is not its own, the sacred describes an act of self-differentiation, or at least differentiation implied in the act of becoming a self. To be a self is also to be an other; it is to act, to perform a role that defines who one is that yet, as a performance, defies that definition.

***The Other Woman.*** This role-play implies no disingenuousness however; is no “actual” identity to be compared to the role that the subject “plays,” since the identity of the subject is always a kind of performance in Laure. In *Le Carnet rouge*, for example, Laure describes her encounters with unnamed intimate relation as a kind of

fiction and role-play: “Entrer dans un monde de fiction out tu joueras un rôle devant moi dans lequel tu m’assignes un rôle une place délimitée.”<sup>67</sup> One here may recall Sartre’s classic analysis of *mauvaise foi* in *L’être et néant*, where Sartre assigns the identity of a café waiter or the “waiterness” of the waiter in a way that betrays the waiter’s “transcendence” and robs him of true recognition. Whereas Sartre would like to posit an identity that transcends the waiter’s role, however, Laure’s statement suggests that this ulterior transcendence and recognition are questionable. Much like Sartre in the café, the figure she addresses assigns a delimited role and place to her (*tu m’assignes un rôle une place délimitée*). Yet this assignment itself describes a role (*tu joueras un rôle devant moi*), such that one may question if this assignment of roles is not itself a role assigned to the addressee. In such a “world of fiction” (*monde de fiction*), moreover, one may question if these “roles” are truly “roles” at all: Is this a fiction *in which* these roles are played, or is it a fiction *that* these roles are played? I.e., are the roles they play a fiction, or is it a fiction that they are playing roles at all? Perhaps in such a world of fiction, “true life” (*la vraie vie?*) has no place or, what is more likely, true life is actually *nothing but* a fiction. This does not mean that such roles are mere fiction opposed to true life, but rather that such fiction is the “truth” of true life, that identity is nothing but a transient, fictive role that will be played again and again along with other roles no less true, no less fictive. Like the ivy that becomes an earthworm, or the earthworm that becomes a ladybug, all identities are roles and rehearsals of roles that obscure an already-obscured “true life.”

In Laure, the feminine seems initially to play a privileged role in this regard. Whereas sovereign figures are typically given a venerable, masculine cast, the feminine seems to possess a subversively privileged association with abjection and transgression. In a notebook dated from 1937, Laure writes “Combien j’aime une vraie

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 198.

putain...Par ma propre faute, par la volonté d'abaissement. Sentiment d'abjection. Le 'vaincu d'avance.' Le 'tu es poussière et tu retourneras en poussière' donc ressemble dès maintenant à la poussière."<sup>68</sup> Indeed, Sade presents a similar case for women in the guise of Justine and Eugénie, whose blasphemies, sodomy, and crime fulfills the role nature gives to them. In this context, the feminine in Laure perpetuates the well-established thematic coupling of the sacred and the feminine found in feminist criticism and sociological studies of taboo.<sup>69</sup> Yet, a closer inspection of Laure's poetry and prose suggests that the case is no so simple; the feminine actually overturns the gendering of the sacred—which in turn ultimately overturns "the feminine" itself. The masculine and the feminine in Laure, in parallel to sovereignty and the sacred, might be envisioned respectively as the opposing extremes of the same circumscribed limit of identity—a limit compromised in this case by the very figuration of gender. Beyond this limit, the feminine becomes not masculine, nor even the "feminine-as-other," but rather something other than masculine *and* other than feminine, i.e., something *queer*.

The opposing extremes mentioned above might be compared to those describing the tenet of sacred ambiguity, which Laure describes in her notes on the sacred: "La vie eut tôt fait de pivoter entre ces deux pôles: l'un sacré, vénéré, adore, qu'il faut exhiber...l'autre innommable, sale, honteux, qu'il faut cacher." Whereas the sovereign-masculine would parallel the former, the *mysterium fascinans*, the feminine

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>69</sup> The history of this coupling is vast; Robertson Smith's account of menstruation and childbirth in Judaism in *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1899), Freud's account of the prohibited maternal body in *Totem and Taboo* (1913), and Marcel Mauss' analysis of women as holy gifts in *Essai sur le don* (1923) provide but a few examples. Later in 1949, Roger Caillois offers one of the first explicit examinations the sacred, sexuality, and sexual difference in the second edition of *L'homme et le sacré* in his essay "Sex et sacré." One of the most significant recent studies of this phenomenon is found in Mary Douglas' 1966 *Purity and Danger : An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo*. The reception of this phenomenon in feminist and queer scholarship varies greatly; Gayle Rubin's famous 1975 response to Mauss' account of women-exchange in "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," for example, shows how the trade of women he describes in *Essai sur le don* undermines gift-exchange and the sexual equality he advocates. On the other hand, Julia Kristeva seeks to expose the subversive power of the sacred-feminine in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (1980) and *Le féminin et le sacré* (1998).

would contrarily represent the latter, the accursed *mysterium tremendum*.<sup>70</sup> The gendered subject thus finds itself between these “religious” alternatives, which seem hardly altogether alternate. In a poem beginning with yet another coupling of Machiavelli and God, she writes:

L’homme–Dieu vis à vis de la femme.  
 La libération?  
                                   L’expression  
 Impossibilité de.....  
 Deux existences qui se ressemblent

L’un    {    écrase  
              supprime  
              tue  
              asphyxie    }    l’autre

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Provocative in the definition of “man” (*l’homme vis à vis de la femme*) is the ambiguity of *l’homme* as either a universal “mankind” or a masculine subject as it is defined by an equally ambiguous confrontation (*vis à vis*) between two gendered, axiological alternatives. Thus several interpretive possibilities for gendered identity present themselves in this first phrase: 1) [humankind *qua* God] confronting woman; 2) humankind *qua* [God confronting woman]; 3) [humankind] *qua* God confronting [woman]; 4) [man *qua* God] confronting woman; 5) man *qua* [God confronting woman]; 6) [man] *qua* God confronting [woman]. The first suggests an innately divine humanity confronted with the vice of woman. The second suggests that humanity describes an ongoing confrontation between a venerable God and womankind or even a gentle, feminine God. In the third, a feminine humankind must confront an oppressive God in the name of woman. The fourth posits the male as a

<sup>70</sup> Laure and Peignot, *Écrits de Laure*, 131. This is Rudolf Otto’s interpretation of the classic dualism described by the sociological tenet of sacred ambiguity, that which he calls the “numinous.” See Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige; über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (München: C. H. Beck, 1963).

<sup>71</sup> Laure and Peignot, *Écrits de Laure*, 177.

divine, sovereign figure in opposition to a presumably accursed womankind. The fifth defines the male as an amalgam of the masculine and feminine, the venerable and the accursed, and the sixth presents a chivalric masculinity siding with woman against an imperious God. The proliferation of possible meanings obscures the relationship of the masculine to the feminine and indeed the very meaning of masculinity and femininity themselves; without answers and without respite, the poet asks if there is any liberation (*libération?*) from the search to “express” the “impossible” (*impossibilité de...* ) resemblance between two “existences” (*deux existences qui se ressemblent*) in the violent conflict (*écrase, supprime, etc.*) between identity and alterity (*l’un / l’autre*). As suggested by the ambiguous gendering of man (*l’homme*) above, it is plausible to assume that these two existences are not two subjects, but rather the presence of dueling (gendered) identities (*l’homme, Dieu, femme*) “internal” to the same subject. Such a duel might take place between the “existence” of two competing forms of manliness or, for that matter, between competing forms of femininity.

When the feminine subject of another poem refers to itself an “archangel” (*archange*) on the one hand and a whore (*putain*) on the other, there is therefore an implicit challenge posed to this axiological opposition. It is worthy to note that Laure’s close friends Bataille and Leiris shared a hieratic conception of prostitution that overturned the Freudian dualism of madonna-whore<sup>72</sup>, one that Laure expresses when writes in a private diary that she would like to “renouveler le sens de

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<sup>72</sup> See Freud’s early essay “The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Modern Life” in which he accounts for impotence in men with maternal women. (In *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, Philip Rieff trans., New York: Touchstone, 1997, 48-60).

l'érôtisme mystique des prostituées chinoises.”<sup>73</sup> The kinship between prostitution and hierophany, whore and angel emerges as the poem progresses:

Archange ou putain  
je veux bien  
Tous les rôles  
me sont prêtés  
La vie jamais reconnue  
La simple vie  
que je cherche encore  
Elle gît  
tout au fond de moi  
leur péché a tué  
toute pureté <sup>74</sup>

If the subject is either an “archangel or whore,” it is because she is paradoxically both, indeed many others (*tous les rôles*), and therefore ultimately none in particular. These “roles” are less alternatives for the feminine subject than false binaries obscuring a commonality found in religious prostitution and “life” (*la vie*) themselves. They are transient, secondary, or “ascribed” (*prêter*), failing to fully recognize a more fundamental vital state that invites all such roles. Life thus goes unrecognized or

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 161. To be sure, this characterization results partially from a romantic conception of the East that Laure’s sociologically conscious peers occasionally perpetuated; nevertheless, Jinghao Zhou notes that early on in the ancient Shang Dynasty “Chinese men believed that they could gain more *yin* from prostitutes than from normal women. Since prostitutes had sex with many men, they had acquired more *yang* essence from them. Thus, they could give a patron more *yang* essence than he had lost” (see Jinghao Zhou, “Chinese Prostitution: Consequences and Solutions in the Post-Mao Era,” in *China: An International Journal* 4.2, 2006: 238-262). In *L’Age d’homme* (1939), published shortly after Laure’s death, Michel Leiris notes that “actuellement, ce qui me frappe le plus dans la prostitution, c’est son caractère religieux” (Michel Leiris, *L’Age d’homme*, 2 ed. [Paris: Gallimard, 1964], 63). While sharing his belief in the religious character of prostitution, Bataille comes to the opposite conclusion in *L’Érotisme* concerning its more pecuniary modern form, which inheres more in a restricted economy of exchange than a general economy of orgiastic excess (see Bataille, *L’Érotisme*, 143-54). Leiris and Bataille are implicitly referring to the practice of hierogamy (Grk. *heiros gamos*), which did not only refer to the nuptial bond of marriage; it also referred to the sex acts performed in temples with the *hierodule*, or temple prostitutes, for reasons of hospitality, social duty, sacrifice, or even general religious vocation. Different forms of this practice were common in Greece, Babylonia, Sumeria, Egypt, and Canaan. In Genesis 38:21, for example, Judah sleeps with his daughter-in-law Shelah, whom he assumes to be a whore; the Hebrew word Judah uses for whore is *kedsha*, which is cognate with the words *kadesh* (“sanctuary or sacred person”) and *kodesh* (“sacred place or thing”).

<sup>74</sup> Laure and Peignot, *Écrits de Laure*, 94.

unknown (*jamais reconnue*), unable to be ultimately subsumed under the false guise of such roles. The ascription of these identities compels the subject to seek out the life such roles hide (*la simple vie / que je cherche encore*), the simple life that lies or rests (*gît*) deep within (*au fond de moi*).

Yet this simple life sought suggests another life, perhaps another role, a “life at rest” (*elle gît*) whose script itself goes unrecognized at first. Again, the life the subject seeks “rests deep within” (yet) “at [its] end” (*au fond de moi*). This, in other words, is to say “here lies the simple life,” or “*ci-gît la simple vie*.”<sup>75</sup> The poem masks an epitaph, much like the poet’s life masks death, the end of life, a catacomb deep within (*au fond de moi*). “The simple life,” the life the feminine subject seeks beyond the masks of archangel and whore is *itself* a mask, a mask for death. Does therefore the true identity of the subject’s life rest in death, or is death yet another role ascribed like femininity, like life? Life and death—or rather “life” and “death”—are thus much like the roles of the whore and archangel, ultimately failing to name an unnamable alterity that, like the former life of a cadaver, always “rests” elsewhere. The feminine subject that begins the poem as an archangel or whore reveals itself to be neither simply archangel, nor whore, nor even necessarily “feminine”—and yet all three at the same time. This whore-angel-woman subject is who she is and yet who she is not, who she is insofar as she *is* “not.” She is, in essence, “the other woman.”

The poet’s recurrent journey from angel to whore is thus not unlike the journey from life to death or selfhood to otherness—and back again. This journey, these journeys that, much like the poem “8,” plunge the feminine subject into the unfamiliar and return it to the place of departure reverberate with the classic literary *topoi* of departure and homecoming. Laure’s speakers, like Dante for example, must journey

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<sup>75</sup> Laure frequently exploits the ambiguity of the French *fond* as both a “bottom, depth” and “end,” describing an ambiguous limit between inside and outside. In a letter to Leiris, she writes “je reste la comme perdue dans un dessin d’André [Masson] ou sur les pentes de l’Etna...reste la muette “comme si rien n’était” étranglé et tout au fond de moi je retrouve une fête magnifique (...)” (Ibid., 266).



into the unfamiliar to become who they are. Dante's self-realization in *La Divina Commedia* and that of Laure's poetic speakers are to be distinguished, however. Dante's Hell marks the site of his heroic departure, but for Laure's subject in the following poem, it signals paradoxically both the site of the journey is *also* the site of return. Whereas the foreboding entrance to Hell marks for Dante the threshold that, once crossed, begins to make the poet the hero he is, for Laure this marks the threshold that makes the "poet" what s/he is *and* is not:

Mettre sur ma porte  
 « Toi qui entres ici  
 Abandonne tout espoir  
 de n'être pas  
 ce que tu es »  
 ou bien "Ici on vit nu"  
     ou nus  
     ou nue <sup>76</sup>

The poet does not venture to the Hell to begin the journey. Rather, Hell is brought to the poet's own door (*ma porte*); the poet's "home" is, as it were, already the journey, marking an infernal site of estrangement and self-estrangement, an eternal return to oneself, away from oneself. The French *porte* redoubles this ambiguity as both a static gateway and a carrying-across (Fr. *porte*, *porte-*, *porter*). It is questionable if indeed the door is the poet's door, or even if the poet "is" the poet. The poetic lineation and relative clauses of "*abandonne tout espoir / de n'être pas / ce que tu es*"--which obliquely suggests the subtitle of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* (*Wie man wird, was man ist*)--provocatively suggest opposing possible meanings: 1) abandon all hope of not [being what you are], meaning that there is no hope for overcoming, change, or heroism, that the venturing subject will remain the subject it was prior to entering Hell; and 2) abandon all hope of [not being what you are], meaning that identity itself

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 115.

implies a hopeless or hellish non-being and otherness. In the former case, *n'être pas* serves a verb, whereas in the second, it is a substantive; the latter arises as a possibility given the multiple possible identities ascribed to the “one that lives bare” (*on vit nu*), which, having “bare life” is also not “one” at all but many (*nus*, *nue*), both masculine and feminine. This multiplicity of (gendered) identities is “found” ironically right when and where “one lives” (*on vit*) on the threshold (*porte*) that divides the one from the many. Much like the door, “nudity” for Laure also signifies a *communal* threshold between selfhood and otherness, as she writes in *Le sacré*: “...la nudité—elle est viol de soi-même, dénudation, communication à d’autres de ce qui est raison de vivre, or cette raison de vivre ‘se déplace.’”<sup>77</sup> “Nudity” signifies a form of “ex-posure” that makes one available to others (*autres*) and otherness a communal reason for life (*raison de vivre*). To be “nude” thus exposes the self to others, the feminine to the masculine, life to death, invigorating the poet’s initial hellish “afterlife” with a renewed communion with others. This poem suggests a quasi-Blakean inversion whereby a personal hell becomes a possible renewed life with others in heaven.

**Conclusion.** Personal identity in Laure therefore describes a state defined and redefined as other than itself. In Luce Irigaray’s terms, the feminine in Laure for example is indeed “the sex that is not one,” but *not* insofar as “she” is sexed feminine, but only insofar sexed identity itself always implies a plurality of identities. In this way, the feminine—which might equally be called the non-feminine, the non-masculine, or *queer*—represents a privileged, albeit transient and mutable site of identity construed and compromised in and through a radical otherness. To be sure, this otherness can be performed as one’s power *over* others in the more “masculine” form of sovereignty and (self-)exception, as in the case of Laure’s Machiavelli or God. And yet, this power could not be so performed without one’s prior otherness “within,”

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 89.

i.e., without the power *of* others that prioritizes the many over the (masculine) one—or rather the many *as* the “feminine” one “that is not one”—and thus forms the basis of an ethics. Such an ethics reveals itself to be indissociable from Laure’s revolutionary politics as well, insofar as her resistance implies multiple possible subject positions.

Drawing from Bataille’s own vast work on the subject, this radical space in which ethics and politics intersect is what Laure would refer to as the “sacred” state of “community” or “communion,” a state of (non-)being that implicates others and otherness. “Le sacré mêlé au Social pour que cela soit sacré,” she writes, “pour que cela *soit*, il faut à mon sens que cela soit ressenti par les autres, en communion avec d’autres.”<sup>78</sup> This communion, in its turn, is achieved through the kindred act of “communication” for which poetry is the model. “L’œuvre poétique est sacrée en ce qu’elle est création d’un évènement topique, ‘communication’ ressentie comme la nudité---elle est...communication à d’autres de ce qui est raison de vivre.”<sup>79</sup> As opposed to literature, which Laure detested, poetry would be an event (*évènement*) similar to Bakhtin’s carnival; it crosses the barriers of “authority” and tradition and sets upon the path of communal life. As the analysis above shows, this crossing is not unlike that implied by self-identity, (political) movements, nature, sovereignty, or

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 88. Laure and Bataille’s concepts of “communion,” “community,” and “communication” are largely indistinguishable. Bataille himself writes in his notes for *Le Sacré* that Laure’s terminology parallels his own. Analysis of Laure’s own literary appropriation of this notion of community, especially as it relates to her relationship to Bataille, can be found in Nadia M. Sahely, “The Laure-Georges Bataille Exchange: Celebrating the Dissymmetry of the Couple in Interwar French Thought,” *Cincinnati Romance Review* 15 (1996) and Milo Sweedler, “From the Sacred Conspiracy to the Unavowable Community: Bataille, Blanchot and Laure’s *Le Sacré*,” *French Studies: A Quarterly Review* 59, no. 3 (2005). Sweedler offers a more complete analysis of community among these authors in his new book, Milo Sweedler, *The Dismembered Community: Bataille, Blanchot, Leiris, and the Remains of Laure* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009).

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 89. In the notes for *Le Sacré* (from which this quote is taken) Bataille emphasizes that Laure’s sacred is less a sociological or philosophical notion than a “lived experience” (*expérience vécue*) not unlike the “event” to which poetry is compared here (130). Bataille echoes this sentiment in *L’expérience intérieure* when he writes that poetry is a communal, intoxicating experience: “l’existence poétique en moi s’adresse à l’existence poétique en d’autres et c’est un paradoxe, sans doute, si j’attends de semblables ivres de poésie ce que je n’attendrais pas les sachants lucides” (Georges Bataille, *L’expérience intérieure* [Paris: Gallimard, 1954], 136).

femininity in Laure. All commonly enact the inexorable fusion and diffusion of otherness in identity, identity in otherness. One might say that these are all common, even communal possibilities of the infinite potential both implied and performed, implied insofar as it is performed, again and again, in and through that which Laure calls *the sacred*.

## CHAPTER IV

### AUTOPSIES OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY: INSCRIPTIONS OF SELF-SACRIFICE IN MICHEL LEIRIS

*Caractère d'intimité du sacré, allié à son  
caractère d'étrangeté. C'est dans le sacré  
qu'on est à la fois le plus soi et le plus  
hors-de-soi.*

-Michel Leiris, *L'homme sans honneur*

**Introduction.** Unlike his close friends Colette Peignot and Georges Bataille--whose evocation of the sacred is singular in its use of “excessive” violence and death--Michel Leiris offers a more personal, poetic, and surreal vision of the sacred. By the time of his participation in the College of Sociology in 1937, Leiris’ writerly preoccupations seem to have all but abandoned the ethnography of the early 30s that culminated in his contentious *L’Afrique fantôme* (1934). In the late 1930s, four related projects--*L’Age d’homme*, *Miroir de la tauromachie*, *L’homme sans honneur*, and *Haut mal* (to which his journal entries may be added)--exhibit common thematic investments and make similar pronouncements concerning the sacred, selfhood, and the everyday. I would argue that these concerns mark less a historical shift in his authorship, however, than an elaboration of the work he began with surrealists in the 1920s, when he first met those with whom he would closely collaborate in the College years, including Masson, Bataille, and Peignot. In an early poem from *Haut mal* entitled “Rien n’est jamais fini,” for example, Leiris evokes the vehement operation of Nature within him, echoing Peignot’s writing of roughly the same period; the vainglorious violence of this inner torment also takes the tragic form of a bullfight, a familiar metaphor he would reprise years later in *Miroir* (1939).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it was Leiris’ experiences during the ethnographer Marcel Griaule’s Dakar-Djibouti mission

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Leiris, *Haut mal, suivi de Autres lancers*, Collection Poésie, 40 (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 20.

of 1931-1932--not his surrealist history--that was of primary importance to other members of the College. Leiris personal witnessing of tribal rites in Africa, especially animal sacrifice, made him unique among his peers. As Denis Hollier notes in a 2004 interview, Bataille and Caillois admired him because he had “lived, direct, first-hand” experience of the sacred (“expérience du sacré - une expérience vécue, directe, de première main”) while in Africa.<sup>2</sup> Leiris himself will later admit in *Fibrilles* that ethnography “[s]’avait séduit comme moyen de toucher à des réalités vivantes”<sup>3</sup>; this fact was harmonious with the stated ambitions of the College to practice a “sacred sociology,” a discipline that differed from accepted science (*une science constituée*) by including “contagious,” “personal,” and “intimate” accounts of the “présence active du sacré.”<sup>4</sup> Beyond his initial January 8th, 1938 contribution entitled “Le sacré dans la vie quotidienne,” an itinerary of sacred things whose surrealist undercurrents are apparent, Leiris would remain a curiously mute participant in the College, one viewed as an ethnographer who left poetry, aesthetics, and surrealism behind, at least until the publication of *L’Age d’homme* in 1939, when familiar surrealist themes like jazz, myth, and imagination would forcefully return.

Despite these shifts in his writerly preoccupations, it is nonetheless possible to trace in Leiris’ work of the 1930s an evolving meditation on subjectivity and personal identity, one which would later become a central feature of his celebrated autobiographical auteurism. In what follows, I would like to examine key moments in this evolving meditation, not simply to understand Leiris’ diachronic development as

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<sup>2</sup> See Sebastien Gallaire and Denis Hollier, “Entretien avec Denis Hollier: Le Collège de sociologie, la poésie et le sacré,” ([http://www.michel-leiris.fr/spip/article.php3?id\\_article=42](http://www.michel-leiris.fr/spip/article.php3?id_article=42)). Bataille himself makes reference to Leiris’ experience of sacrifice on the February 5th meeting of the College of Sociology when he said “selon Leiris, le moment essentiel du sacrifice, le moment de la mise à mort est un moment d’extraordinaire intensité” (Georges Bataille and Denis Hollier, *Le Collège de sociologie : 1937-1939* [Paris: Gallimard, 1979], 158). Leiris recounts the sacrifice he witnessed in Gondar and its quasi-erotic personal effects on him later in *L’Age d’homme*.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Leiris, *Fibrilles*, vol. 3, *La règle du jeu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 290.

<sup>4</sup> Bataille and Hollier, *Le Collège de sociologie : 1937-1939*, 300.

avant-garde author, ethnographer, and poet of the interwar years, but also expose how Leirisian selfhood consistently depends on a certain logic of self-sacrifice. As his readers know, for Leiris, autobiography is a particularly vital artform of self-creation. Indeed, he initially turned to autobiography as a means to fuse literature and life, to make artistic creation and self-creation simultaneous if not synonymous endeavors which synthetically transcend the merely aesthetic and broach personal risk, tragedy, or even death. As he states in his first autobiographical work *L'Age d'homme*, autobiography thus understood is “ce qu’est pour le torero la corne acérée du taureau, qui seule...confère une réalité humaine à son art.”<sup>5</sup> Like bullfighting, autobiography is a literary performance that imperils the artist, bridging the gap between art and life paradoxically through self-exposure to the unknown, which exists both in the form of the reader and the written “subject” one becomes through writing. It therefore follows that Leiris most admires those who, like Nietzsche’s tightrope walker in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, risk their lives through their art, their means of “making a living.” Leiris expresses a special affinity for his uncle--himself a tightrope walker--because of shared predilection for jeopardy and risk:

Sans vouloir me comparer à lui au point de vue du courage, je me sens très proche de cet oncle qui toute sa vie rechercha, avec une constance admirable, ce qui pour d’autres n’était qu’un abaissement...tant il avait le goût de ce qui est nu et authentique...tant il devait trouver de joie aussi à *se sacrifier*, en cela extrêmement semblable à moi qui ai si longtemps recherché (en même temps que redouté)...la souffrance, la faillite, l’expiation, le châtement.<sup>6</sup>

“Courageous” and “admirable” for Leiris is his uncle’s general willingness to brave peril, and this is, to be sure, a virtue that he will associate throughout with the titular

<sup>5</sup> Michel Leiris, *L'Age d'homme*, 2 ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 10. For more on Leiris’ practice and understanding of autobiography, see Seán Hand, *Michel Leiris : Writing the Self*, Cambridge Studies in French 70 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Hand offers what is perhaps the most complete study of the theoretical import of Leirisian autobiography on the concept of self-identity.

<sup>6</sup> Leiris, *L'Age d'homme*, 79-80.

subject: manhood (*l'age d'homme*). But this manliness is counterintuitive, preferring abasement (*abaissement*), failure (*faillite*), and punishment (*chatiment*) to dominance, control, or success. It is not his uncle's fearless triumphs, but that which his uncle lets triumph *over him* that the autobiographer most valorizes.<sup>7</sup> In essence, Leiris admires his uncle for his power to be courageously powerless; the uncle becomes who he is insofar as he can fearlessly, joyfully (*de joie*) “unbecome” who he is through the very act of self-sacrifice (*se sacrifier*). It is fitting that Leiris champions his virile, acrobatic uncle since it is precisely this kind of death *qua* self-creation that he himself seeks through autobiography.

As the previous example suggests, by the time of *L'Age d'homme*, Leiris conceives autobiography to be a literary form of suicide for which self-sacrifice is exemplary. In this vein, his stated “désir de m'exposer (dans tous les sens du terme)” takes on literary, religious, ethical significance at once. Eschewing the narcissism that may be associated with the genre, Leiris is revered for transforming it into a *mise-en-abîme* that places the autobiographical “subject” at the limits of authorial possibility and possible auto-realization. As such, it does not complete Narcissus' mortal jump into the reflective pool, so to speak, but instead attempts it, suspends it, maintains it as a possibility. “Le saut de Narcisse,” he writes, “est un ‘saut de la mort’ qui, l'affranchit, ne l'affranchit qu'en l'anéantissant.”<sup>8</sup> Autobiography thus becomes a quasi-sacrificial act: it is an artistic form of self-creation achieved through self-abandon to one's own unknown otherness, that is, the “subject” that one becomes through autobiography. When he refers to autobiography in *L'Age d'homme* as a form of “littérature engagée,” it is because the autobiographer “engages” him/herself

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed, I would claim this to be the more general meaning of “virility” (*virilité*) so often referenced in *L'Age d'homme*, for which Leiris' prime example is Holophernes. This is roughly the same virility that appears in Bataille's writings of the late 30s in texts like “L'apprenti sorcier,” which similarly concerns the subject's assent to death.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Leiris, *La règle du jeu*, Collection L'Imaginaire (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 107.



(*s'engager*) as an unknown other, and this is truly an “engagement” in the largest possible sense: it is a form of commitment, departure, and communion. Such an engagement is shared by author and audience alike, insofar as the writer broaches the autobiographical “subject” in a way analogous to--and thus communal with--the reader. By changing the subject (*modifier*) and helping the subject to realize this (*prendre conscience*), Leiris’ autobiography “introduisit également un élément nouveau dans [ses] rapports avec autrui, à commencer par [ses] rapports avec [ses] proches.”<sup>9</sup> For this reason, autobiography might be said to begin paradoxically with others and otherness as well, and it thus must be willing to sacrifice the autobiographical self *for itself* as well as for others, insofar as it can be autobiographical at all. In this way, it is fitting that Jacques Derrida cites *in extenso* the “Persephone” chapter of Leiris’ *Biffures* in *Marges de la philosophie*, wherein philosophy is likewise thought in relation to its “others.”<sup>10</sup> Leiris’ autobiography and Derrida’s philosophy are both *biffures*--crossed-out or crossed-through, that is--by an otherness that through crossing continually divides them (*biffure*, *bifur-*) between presence and absence, capturing the equivocal play of identity and difference implied in all autobiographical “subjects.” To author a *biffure*, much like the elided pronunciation of “happily” (*reusement*) Leiris discusses in *Biffures* and elsewhere, is not “appropriate”; it is not “une chose à moi” as he says; rather, “il participe de cette réalité qu’est le langage de mes frères, de ma soeur, et celui de mes parents. De chose propre à moi, il devient chose commune et ouverte.”<sup>11</sup> For Leiris, the *biffure* of the subject is also the subject of autobiography, and this “subject” is therefore somehow self-sacrificially suicidal.

<sup>9</sup> Leiris, *L'Age d'homme*, 15.

<sup>10</sup> Drawing upon Leiris’ conceit that an account of oneself always begins and ends with others in *Biffures*, Derrida claims that philosophy always “penser son autre,” “son autre,” that is, “ce qui la limite et dont elle relève dans son essence, sa définition, sa production.” See Jacques Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1972), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Leiris, *Biffures*, La Règle du jeu, vol. I (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 12.

Indeed, suicide is a persistent theme in Leiris' writing, one exemplary in highlighting the highly vital association between Leiris' literature and life. As Susan Sontag has rightly suggested, "it might be said that for [Leiris], life becomes real only under the threat of suicide. The same is true of the vocation of literature."<sup>12</sup> Leiris own attempted suicide, for example, later becomes the focus of *Fibrilles* (1956) wherein, feeling demoralized after the commercial success of *Fourbis* (1955), Leiris takes an overdose of barbiturates and goes to bed famously stating "tout ça, c'est de la littérature."<sup>13</sup> Being suicidal, Leiris was in a state "mariant vie et mort, ivresse et acuité de vue, ferveur et négation" at which he embraced "le plus étroitement cette chose fascinante...la poésie."<sup>14</sup> Sentiments like these echo moments in *L'Age d'homme* when he interprets the story of Cleopatra's suicide like a Freudian dreamwork. Cleopatra captures the "deeper meaning" (*sens profond*) of suicide: "devenir à la fois soi et l'autre, mâle et femelle, sujet et objet, ce qui est tué et ce qui tue---seule possibilité de communion avec soi-même...châtiment qu'on s'inflige afin d'avoir le droit de s'aimer trop soi-même, telle apparaît donc, en dernière analyse, la signification de suicide."<sup>15</sup> As the limit between life and literature, suicide exposes the hidden multiplicity masked by the author's subjectivity. In Leiris, they are both commonly associated with eroticism, aestheticism, and nobility, as the example of Cleopatra illustrates. To Cleopatra in turn may be added the figures of the hero, lover, and matador, who similarly fashion their own deaths nobly in the name of a living passion. In his unfinished work *Le sacré dans la vie quotidienne* (1939), an outgrowth

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<sup>12</sup> Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: MacMillan, 2001), 66. Her mixed review of Leiris' *L'Age d'homme* in this famous collection of essays is useful for understanding the text, if not Leiris himself, within the broader context of literary modernism. She indicts the text for being "hermetic and opaque, sometimes boring" without, however, giving full weight to the importance of hermeticism and everydayness *themselves* for Leiris and the surrealists (Ibid., 68).

<sup>13</sup> Leiris, *Fibrilles*, 106.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 292.

<sup>15</sup> ———, *L'Age d'homme*, 142.

of the essay he delivered before the College of Sociology, Leiris writes that “la mort dont on choisit les conditions (*soit suicide...*) est moins redoutable que l’autre. Ex. de mort noble : tauromachie, chasse aux grandes fauves ; de mort ignoble : assassinat, guerre.”<sup>16</sup> The autobiographer is noble like Cleopatra or a bullfighter because s/he too playfully takes life into his own hands, so to speak, in the act of writing.

That Leiris champions these figures for their suicidal tendencies, however, means ironically that they will live on, precisely because the act of suicide is never properly “their own.” Suicide heralds another possible life on the horizon of alterity: the “life,” so to speak, of the “male and female, subject and object,” etc. In risking life for their art, the acrobat or autobiographer hearken a life greater still as legends, myths, martyrs, or heroes. It is therefore difficult to distinguish suicide from self-sacrifice in Leiris, since all commonly continually resurrect, and this surreptitious resurrection realizes not only the goal of writing, but the writer him/herself. In this vein, it is also possible to think of autobiography and other forms of art--poetry, myth, fiction, even portraiture--which frequently find their way into Leiris’ self-

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<sup>16</sup> Michel Leiris and Jean Jamin, *L’homme sans honneur : notes pour le sacré dans la vie quotidienne : transcription et fac-similé* (Paris: J.-M. Place, 1994), 15. It is worth to note that killing others (*assassinat, guerre*) does not achieve the same effects of self-sacrifice/suicide for Leiris. Given that Leiris insists on the disidentification of the subject that occurs in the latter practices, however, one may question the extent to which the ethical and valorous death of self-sacrifice can truly be distinguished from the sacrifice of others, above all since Leiris insists on a “universal” alterity. By emphasizing the idea of suicide and self-sacrifice, the precise motivations and political effects of self-sacrifice are secondary concerns for him, though they are typically aesthetic, ethical, and communal. Allan Stoekl makes a similar observation in his book *Politics, Writing, Mutilation*: “Leiris’ [Le règle du jeu] has exiled...the most horrifying and unthinkable political alternatives. We might imagine the conjunction of the two political extremes in question in an individual...at the moment of his death...for example, a rigorous, rational, and collective political orientation coming up against the passivity of the traitor who executes, at the order of the fascists, one of his countrymen. Because both extremes...are embodied in the same individual, the person he executes will be himself” (Allan Stoekl, *Politics, Writing, Mutilation : The Cases of Bataille, Blanchot, Roussel, Leiris, and Ponge* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985], 65). It is worth of note that Leiris does make the following statement in *L’homme sans honneur*, revealing his own difficulty in distinguishing sacrificial communion from a police state: “La communion des flics, dans ce cas, devrait représenter un degré de communion très faible; mais est-il bien prouvé que, pour être rudimentaire, cette communion en soit moins forte?” (Leiris and Jamin, *L’homme sans honneur : notes pour le sacré dans la vie quotidienne : transcription et fac-similé*, 58). In contrast, Bataille is far less apt to distinguish the categories of sacrifice and self-sacrifice or the reasons for them, as his controversial accounts of Hiroshima and the *Leng T’che* illustrate.

exposition. When Leiris says, for example, that “l’art présuppose le refus de la condition mortelle,” it does not do so not because it opposes or transcends mortality, but because mortality is the *sine qua non* condition of art’s own immortal refusal, a refusal maintained forever in the *guise* of greater, everlasting life. Such is the aporia of self-sacrifice, which escapes death through a resurrection that nevertheless necessitates death itself.

The immortality of art, of writing, is therefore found less in actual death than in *duplicity*, both in the common sense of deception and in the strong sense of doubling (L. *duplicitem*). In *Fibrilles*, this doubling is illustrated to be both temporal and spatial. “Je me vois...divisé entre deux durées,” he writes, “[entre] temps de la vie et temps du livre, que je n’arrive presque jamais--serait-ce approximativement--à faire coïncider.” Lived-time (*temps de la vie*) is superceded by the time of the book, which can only ever be an “approximation” (*approximativement*) of the former. Analogously, the writer-subject and subject-written remain mere *faux-semblants* of each other, because “l’art de se voir du dehors comme si l’on n’était pas soi, faire son portrait écrit resterait illusoire...due à ce qu’avant même que la transcription soit achevée la chose à transcrire s’est modifiée.” In essence, autobiography is a *simulacrum* of the writer’s life as Other, and yet this Other--as the previous example shows--is always already somehow doubled through the act of writing. Through the insistent suppression of the subject, the writing of one’s life thus “doubles” as the writing of death which itself, of course, can never be written. In its ongoing tangential approach to death, writing can thus “peut aussi connaître des paroxysmes et...aiguiller vers un simulacre de mort.”<sup>17</sup> Such writing is not specific to the autobiographer, however; it is also the “tricherie du

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<sup>17</sup> Leiris, *Fibrilles*, 204. This recalls Pierre Klossowski’s famous formulation of the simulacrum, which “au sens imitatif est actualisation de quelque chose d’incommunicable en soi ou irréprésentable: proprement le ‘phantasme’ dans sa contrainte obsédante.” See Pierre Klossowski, *La ressemblance* (Marseille: André Dimanche, 1984), 76. Leiris’ first publication--*Simulacre* (1925)--offers a series of sordid words, poems, and illustrations that revolve around the familiar surrealist themes of death, selfhood, and the unknown.

poète, qui ne joue pas directement avec la mort mais, au maximum, se trouve menacé de mort”--a point to which I shall return later.<sup>18</sup> If literature can be as duplicitous as Leiris suggests, life--at least insofar as it is suicidal, sacrificial--proves to be no less duplicitous, as it opens space for eternally shifting, simulated subjectivity.

Emblematic of this doubling and duplicity are the frequent performative contradictions to be found in his writing throughout the 1930s. By the time Leiris would concern himself specifically with the sacred and sacrifice in texts like “Le sacré dans la vie quotidienne” and *Miroir de la tauromachie* in 1939, the stage is set for a theoretical formulation of this elusive and equivocal subjectivity he had already explored as a surrealist and ethnographer. Indeed, it is this subjectivity that has become the center of critical debate: to what degree do Leiris’ surrealist preoccupations infiltrate his ethnography? To what degree is he aware of these preoccupations in his ethnographic writings of Africa? Does Africa’s foreignness represent an unrepresentable, radical alterity, or rather an alterity fetishized and appropriated by the fantasies of European science and surrealism? In short, where and how does Leiris position himself as a “subject” in his different forms of writing and his representation of others?

As an ethnographer, Leiris initially sought to eschew the racist exoticism so prominent in interwar France, only later to articulate this exoticism in his own ethnographic method and personal aspirations. This exoticism again arises in his fetishized and feminine depictions of Africa which, in turn, challenge phallic and phantasmatic desires of fetishism itself. The reason for these contradictions can be clarified through analysis of the subjectivity mentioned above, wherein self-identity is grounded in sordid forms of self-expropriation for which self-sacrifice is the model. As Leiris’ critic Nathalie Barberger writes, “l’écrivain, dans la posture d’une victime

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<sup>18</sup> Leiris and Jamin, *L’homme sans honneur : notes pour le sacré dans la vie quotidienne : transcription et fac-similé*, 56.

sacrée, ne cesse d'écrire le récit de sa mort et de sa résurrection, de se mettre en scène en revenant.”<sup>19</sup> Self-sacrifice offers a new means of conceptualizing the vexing paradoxes of Leiris’ self-reflexive literature as well as his more troubling and controversial representations of the Other, including Africa. To wit, self-sacrifice, with its nascent repetitions and deadly detours for the subject, anticipates more recent performative theories of identity.

***Human, All Too Human.*** Many critics have, like Leiris himself, rightly questioned if he ever truly parted with his surrealist preoccupations as an ethnographer in the 1930s. Such is James Clifford’s position in his acclaimed *The Predicament of Culture : Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, wherein Leiris is presented in support of his argument concerning the Eurocentric and colonial features of ethnography, a “science of cultural jeopardy” as he calls it, one that much like surrealism “presupposes a constant willingness to be surprised, to unmake interpretive syntheses, and to value--when it comes--the unclassified, unsought other.” The efforts to estrange the familiar--a trend in Leiris’ ethnographic and aesthetic writings both--are motivations that Clifford convincingly links to surrealism, if not modernism more broadly.<sup>20</sup> Such estrangement is not strange to exoticism and racist fantasy either, as Marianna Torgovnick claims in *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*. For Torgovnick, Leiris’ African expedition only confirmed his shared interwar French negrophilia.<sup>21</sup> “The real [Africa],” she claims, “fits [Leiris’] image of it, and the site of

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<sup>19</sup> Nathalie Barberger, *Michel Leiris, l'écriture du deuil*, *Objet* (Villeneuve-d'Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 1998), 237.

<sup>20</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture : Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 147. Of Leiris and his companion ethnographers, Clifford states they “departed in 1931 with a structured aesthetic in mind, a vision of Africa, and a certain (essentially fetishist) conception of how ‘it’ should be collected and represented” (Ibid., 137).

<sup>21</sup> See James Clifford’s article “Negrophilia” in Denis Hollier and R. Howard Bloch, *A New History of French Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 901-8. Clifford cites Leiris’ fascination with jazz and “negro” culture as a representation of the avant-garde’s primitivist romanticism with African culture.

‘Paradise’ becomes that of the African woman.”<sup>22</sup> Ruth Larson and Denis Hollier, however, cite *L’Afrique fantôme* (1935) and Leiris’ revered ethnography thesis *La langue secrète des Dogon de Sanga* (1948) respectively as reasons to believe he resisted the European political and aesthetic “domestication” of africaness.<sup>23</sup> In an 1988 interview, Leiris himself states that he and the surrealists were anticolonialist even before they were Marxist or antibourgeois, though he suggests that such sympathies might have partially derived from exoticist fancy.<sup>24</sup> Sean Hand, however, convincingly argues a more moderate position regarding Leiris’ *journal intime* in which African otherness offers a means of ethical and cultural self-critique despite (or even because) of its surrealist exoticism.<sup>25</sup> Debates such as these orbit around two

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<sup>22</sup> Torgovnick here is referring to the Ethiopian woman Leiris reports to have fallen in love with in Gondar as recounted in *L’Age d’homme*. See Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive : Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 112. Such is also Michael Janis’ position in Michael Janis, *Africa and Modernism: Transitions in Literature, Media, and Philosophy*, Routledge Studies in Cultural History: 6 (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> See Bataille and Hollier, *Le Collège de sociologie : 1937-1939*, 97. And Ruth Larson, "Ethnography, Thievery, and Cultural Identity: A Rereading of Michel Leiris's *L’Afrique fantôme*," *PMLA* 112, no. 2 (1997): 241. Larson claims that by witnessing and reporting the “theft” of artifacts on the mission, Leiris was effectively beginning to distance himself from the extractive ethnography that served French colonialism. This move, she claims, anticipates his later attitudes in the 1940s, wherein Leiris argues for ethnography in the service of decolonization.

<sup>24</sup> Leiris states “basically, we were concerned about the situation of the colonized peoples well before we were concerned about the situation of the proletariat...We were much more inclined to be solidary [sic] with ‘exotic’ oppressed people than with oppressed living here.” See Sally and Jean Jamin Price, "A Conversation with Michel Leiris," *Current Anthropology* 29, no. 1 (1988): 159. While there is significant credible evidence to assert that Leiris remained a committed anti-colonialist throughout his life, the reasons for this, as well as his perception of the colonized and ethnography, would change significantly from the 20s to the 50s. For more on Leiris’ attitudes regarding Africa and colonization, see Gerard Coge, "Objet cherché, accord perdu: Michel Leiris et l’Afrique," *Homme: Revue Française d’Anthropologie* 151 (1999). and Ruth Larson, "Michel Leiris: Race, Poetry, Politics: Rereading the Mission Lucas," *SubStance: A Review of Theory and Literary Criticism* 32, no. 3 [102] (2003).

<sup>25</sup> Hand’s presentation of *L’Afrique fantôme* is useful in framing the critical debate surrounding the text itself. “The result” of the text, he explains, “is a dual and sometimes conflicting operation...On the one hand, Leiris is drawn immediately to the instances and sites of a distinctly surrealist manifestation of the Other, that is, to the sacred and transgressive dimensions of animism, fetishism, [etc.]...on the other hand, he simultaneously seeks all the while to comment on these performances of the Other in such a way as to map out an existential ethic for his own person.” See Sean Hand, "Phantom of the Opus: Colonialist Traces in Michel Leiris's *L’Afrique fantôme*," *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* 18, no. 2 (1995): 175. Sympathetic to Hand’s position, I would claim that it is precisely *because* of the “performance” he speaks of that the “dual” and “conflicting” positions of otherness in *L’Afrique fantôme* subverts the other, more polemical positions mentioned above. Such performances effectively attempt to essentialize a radical alterity that ultimately resists all essentialism.

related but distinct points of contention concerning Leiris' interwar writings on Africa, including *L'Afrique fantôme*: the first concerns the role of Leiris' fetishized representations of Africa, as an ethnographer; the second regards the role of ethnography--if not Leiris in particular--in support of French colonialism. If indeed, as the critics above have noted, his aesthetic preoccupations as a surrealist are at times difficult to distinguish from his ethnographic methods, I would claim that this "ethnographic surrealism" anticipated his more self-exploratory writings on selfhood, the sacred, and myth in the late 1930s.

In the time leading up to the Dakar-Djibouti mission, Leiris' himself believed that ethnography could redress the Eurocentric prejudices that supported racism and colonialism. This belief echoed that of Griaule himself, who stated in *Documents* that ethnography in principle maintains distance from its object, even indeed from its own methods, in the effort to avoid parochial judgement and prejudice. "L'ethnographie," Griaule writes, "s'intéresse au beau et au laid, au sens européen de ces mots absurdes. Elle a cependant tendance à se méfier du beau...Elle se méfie aussi d'elle même--car elle est science blanche, c'est-à-dire entachée de préjugés--et elle ne refusera pas une valeur esthétique à un objet parce qu'il est courant ou fabriqué en série."<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Leiris (initially) thought the presumed objectivity of "the ethnographer's eye"--as he explains in a 1930 *Documents* essay of the same name--could redress the prejudice of the "mentalité blanche." His future voyage to Africa, he announces, "doit contribuer à dissiper pas mal de ces erreurs et, partant, à ruiner nombre de leurs conséquences, entre autres le préjugé de races, iniquité contre laquelle on ne s'élèvera jamais assez." The ethnographer is uniquely suited to this task, he claims, since s/he places "toutes les civilisations sur le même pied et ne considérant aucune d'entre elles comme plus valable qu'une autre *a priori* en dépit de la complexité," thus making ethnography

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<sup>26</sup> Marcel Griaule, "Un coup de fusil," in *Documents: archéologie, beaux-arts, ethnographie, variétés*, ed. Georges Bataille (Paris: Jean Michel Place, 1991), 46.



itself “la plus *généralement humaine*, parce que, non limitée--ainsi que la plupart des autres--aux hommes blancs, à leur mentalité, à leurs intérêts, elle s'étend à *la totalité* des hommes, qu'elle étudie dans leurs rapports entre eux et non d'une manière arbitrairement individuelle.”<sup>27</sup> In contrast to the “phantasmagoric” exoticism of Raymond Roussel--his foil in this essay--Leiris claims that such a perspective will afford him the “best method for acquiring a real, living knowledge” of Africa (*une connaissance réelle...vivante*), the very kind of empirical experience later sought by Bataille and other members of the College. As the comments above suggest, however, Leiris envisions not only a “real” Africa unmediated by European influence, but indeed a kind of mythic proto-reality before or beyond civilization as such which, as seen through the lens of ethnography, reveals a “living” (*vivant*), “whole humanity” (*la totalité des hommes*).<sup>28</sup> For Leiris, therefore, ethnography was initially more than a science; it was an ethical project, a humanism, albeit one, as I will show,

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<sup>27</sup> Michel Leiris, “L'oeil de l'ethnographe: a propos de la mission Dakar-Djibouti,” in *Documents: archéologie, beaux-arts, ethnographie, variétés*, ed. Georges Bataille (Paris: Jean Michel Place, 1991), vol. 1, 407 (emphasis mine). Leiris echoes this belief in the preface to the 1950 edition of *L'Afrique fantôme*, where he claims that he wanted to “abattre des cloisons entre lesquelles j'étouffais et élargir jusqu'à une mesure vraiment humaine mon horizon. Ainsi conçu, l'ethnographie ne pouvait que me décevoir: une science humaine reste une science et l'observation détachée ne saurait, à elle seule, amener le contact” (———, *L'Afrique fantôme*, 2nd ed. [Paris: Gallimard, 1951], 13).

<sup>28</sup> In the *Predicament of Culture*, Clifford associates Leiris and other participants of the College of Sociology with what he perceives to be the “essentialist humanism” of the Musée de l'homme. “To speak of ‘man’ and the ‘human’ is to run the risk of reducing contingent differences to a system of universal essences,” he claims. In support, he cites the following words from Paul Valéry, engraved in the parapet of the Musée de l'homme (Trocadero) to capture the meaning of this essence: “Tout homme crée sans le savoir / comme il respire / mais l'artiste se sent créer / son acte engage tout son être / sa peine bien-aimée le fortifie.” While this first passage does evoke the essentialism Clifford describes, he fails to consider the rest of the poem, which challenges this interpretation, if not the brand of humanism he associates with the museum: “Il dépend de celui qui passe / que je sois tombe ou trésor / Que je parle ou me taise, ceci ne tient qu'à toi / Ami n'entre pas sans désir.” As this second stanza suggests, the identity of man (*l'homme*) is a great deal more uncertain, becoming either treasure or tomb, speaker or silence depending on *the desire of the other (ami)*. If there is any humanist essentialism to be found in this poem from Valéry, it is the “essence of human otherness” which, as the final lines suggest, is quite aleatory and precarious. Whatever the broader ideological or cultural impact of the Musée de l'homme, it is this more equivocal humanism *predicated on otherness* that Leiris (like Valéry above) evokes in his writings of the 1930s. Clifford's historical argument also does not always give due nuance to the College's authors or the variance in their respective positions on common issues. See Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture : Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, 144-5.

predicated upon a mutable sense of humanity.<sup>29</sup> Leiris' is not a classical humanism; it inheres not in an ideal human essentialism (as James Clifford suggests), but rather in a performative self-estrangement and sacrificial dis-identification for which Leiris' "autobiographical ethnography" is an example.<sup>30</sup>

"L'oeil de l'ethnologue" is not his first essay to address the "humanity" of the human sciences in *Documents*, nor is it his first to qualify the meaning of scientific objectivity. In "A propos du 'musée des sorciers'," a 1929 surrealist essay vaunting the humanism of the occult, Leiris claims that disciplines like alchemy and magic are uniquely "human" because they seek out the "marvelous" (*le merveilleux*) and the "Absolute" (*l'Absolu*) in the study of the exterior world.<sup>31</sup> The occult sciences, in other words, reveal themselves to be "human" practices insofar as they add subjective enchantment to the disenchanting limitations of objective knowledge. As such, they

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<sup>29</sup> Leiris' colleague and biographer Jean Jamin states likewise that Leiris' description of the ethnographer's relationship to his/her object evinces a broader ethnical and ontological relationship to otherness. Ethnographers "devenir des observateurs observant ces autres qui sont eux-mêmes, à la limite cet autre qui est soi-même." The ethnographer's position therefore "définit-elle une nouvelle position de l'ethnologue par rapport à l'ethnographie, une nouvelle conception de celle-ci: à la fois science et morale d'action, connaissance et intervention (engagement dirait-on maintenant) à la fois enquête et quête de l'être" (Leiris and Jamin, *L'homme sans honneur : notes pour le sacré dans la vie quotidienne : transcription et fac-similé*, 15). The radical estrangement from the object demanded by the ethnographer's eye, Jamin suggests, sustains a radical alterity that founds the basis of an ethics. This position is generally true and cannot be doubted the case of texts like *L'homme sans honneur*, with its emphasis on community and communication. However, given that this alterity is frequently presented as paradigmatically African or feminine (in the 1930s) qualifies the more Levinasian alterity implied by Jamin's position. As my argument suggests, such alterity is less universal or unqualified than continually *re-qualified* or *re-identified* through the categories of race, gender, and poetry.

<sup>30</sup> "While praising the humanist, progressive aims of the new ethnographic museology," Clifford writes, "Leiris allowed himself a regretful glance backward to the old Trocadero museum, with its distinctive ambiance and a 'certain familiar air (lacking didactic rigidity)'. This "humanism" for Clifford offers a "particular version of human authenticity...All people love, create, worship. A stable, complete 'humanity' is confirmed" (Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture : Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, 144). As I suggest above, however, this is a mischaracterization of Leiris' humanism (see note 28).

<sup>31</sup> The ideas advanced in this essay derive directly from surrealism. Aragon makes mention of the marvelous (*le merveilleux*) in *La révolution surréaliste*, and Breton muses in *Les manifestes du surréalisme* that "la peur, l'attrait de l'insolite, les chances, le goût du luxe" are common concerns of the marvelous; Breton reprises the idea frequently elsewhere, especially in his discussion of Jacqueline Lamba in *L'amour fou*. See André Breton, *Manifestes du surréalisme*, Idées 23 : Littérature (Paris: Gallimard, 1973); ———, *L'amour fou* (Paris: Club français du livre, 1965); and "Idées" in *La révolution surréaliste*, vol. I, 1925.

evinced a wholeness, an “absolute” that normative science cannot. In the Absolute, it is not only the object of study that is made whole, but indeed humanity *itself*, insofar as it creates a bond between humanity and the world--or even “reproduces the creation of the world” (*la reproduction de la création du monde, en plus petit*). They therefore resist the “intellectualisme qui amputait l’homme d’une moitié de lui-même” by recreating the bonds between subject and object, inner-life and outer world normally divided by normative science.<sup>32</sup> Given the “human significance” of this practice, it ultimately matters little for Leiris whether such sciences yield objective truth, since “ses symboles sont inappréciables au point de vue poétique, donc au point de vue de *la signification humaine*.”<sup>33</sup> If aesthetics does not predominate over epistemology in Leiris’ humanism, it certainly has a constitutive role to play. The interest of occult science lies not merely in the understanding of the material world, but rather in man’s unique relationship to this world, i.e., its “human” value. While the former “amputates,” the latter makes whole. Alchemy and the occult are interesting to study, he writes, “parce qu’on peut ainsi participer à l’élaboration de cette science humaine et se reconnaissant comme telle, science de l’homme, faite par l’homme et pour l’homme, qu’il est nécessaire de substituer sans tarder à la science abstraite, morte, inhumaine.”<sup>34</sup> To study the occult is essentially to study humanity itself through *continually seeking humanity’s own otherness*, the human being’s own amputated human parts. And this, in turn, is a form of study that, contrary to a violent or “dead” science, promotes a living, human integrity. As the above suggests, however, such integrity is never *entirely* integral, never entirely complete, since such a state would of course reproduce the inhuman dualism of identity and difference for which normative

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<sup>32</sup> Michel Leiris, “A propos du ‘musée des sorciers’” in *Documents: archéologie, beaux-arts, ethnographie, variétés*, ed. Georges Bataille (Paris: Jean Michel Place, 1991), vol. 1, 112.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 116. Emphasis mine.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

science is culpable. Instead, such integrity, if it is possible at all, can only be acquired through the surrendering of the scientific part for a human whole magically and mystically *infinitely* greater.

Much like ethnography, therefore, the occult sciences harbor “excessive” humane value; like the “ethnographer’s eye,” which is able to see beyond the limited perspective of a white Europe, so too is the occult able to broaden the limited perspective of an inhumane, abstract science. Given this more “human” perspective, so to speak, both alchemy and ethnography constitute true human sciences, indeed *humane* sciences, commonly able to capture (if not create) a synergistic human whole greater than the sum of its parts. I consider this to be the very meaning of Leiris’ humanism, which is not predicated on sentiment or reason, but desire: to find “the human whole” in what is always more-than-whole, indeed more-than-human, that “marvelous” or “absolute” otherness that paradoxically *both compromises and constitutes* the wholeness sought. Such is the logic that results from the concept of infinity--a concept to which I will later return.

Despite the shift in his understanding of scientific objectivity from an impediment to aid, his conception of the human remains constant, or at least constantly inconstant, insofar as it refers to a humanity always yet to become whole through a (partial) otherness. As I will later argue, this is also the function of fetishism for Leiris. As such, the human is a form of radical possibility and otherness, always open to an infinite multiplicity of identities--raced, gendered, or national--realized through self-sacrificial encounters with the strange, exotic, and unknown. This “humanism,” which trails throughout his writings as a surrealist, ethnographer, and autobiographer, not only forges a thematic link throughout Leiris’ disparate writings of the 1930s, but indeed anticipates the self-sacrificial communitarianism he would later associate with the sacred. In *L’homme sans honneur*, for example, Leiris notes that the

“caractère d'intimité du sacré [est] allié à son caractère d'étrangeté...parce-qu'on se meut, alors, sur le plan de la *totalité*.”<sup>35</sup>

It is therefore both ironic and appropriate that the category of the “human” returns when Leiris questions himself on the Dakar-Djibouti mission. As Michael Janis rightly notes, “at some point in his travels across sub-Saharan Africa...Leiris finds himself vexingly exotic. Initially lured by the abyss of the unknown...he turns to a new abyss, the self.”<sup>36</sup> By the summer of 1942, he begins to question the general value of the mission which--beside impressing France's influence on the continent--was to collect data and artifacts for the musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, the future Musée de l'homme.<sup>37</sup> As part of his self-examination, Leiris challenges the meaning and possibility of the objectivity sought in Griaule's ethnography. Despite his earlier attempts, Leiris ultimately finds such objectivity not only difficult but--to use his own word--“inhumane” (*inhumaine*). On August 25th, 1932, he expresses his struggle with the ethnographic method, which “fait prendre cette position si *inhumaine*

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<sup>35</sup> Leiris and Jamin, *L'homme sans honneur : notes pour le sacré dans la vie quotidienne : transcription et fac-similé*, 89.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Janis, *Africa after Modernism : Transitions in Literature, Media, and Philosophy*, Routledge Studies in Cultural History 6 (New York: Routledge, 2008), 53.

<sup>37</sup> On March 30th, 1932, for example, Leiris laments that “le voyage que nous effectuons n'a été jusqu'à présent, en somme, qu'un voyage de touristes et ne semble pas près de changer.” The following day, he continues: “la vie que nous menons est on ne peut plus plate et bourgeoise. Le travail, pas essentiellement différent d'un travail d'usine, de cabinet ou de bureau. Pourquoi l'enquête ethnographique m'a-t-elle fait penser souvent à un interrogatoire de police?” (Leiris, *L'Afrique fantôme*, 259-60). These sentiments challenge his original vision for the ethnographic mission, which has now become more akin to a colonialist tourism, policing, or industry. Moments like these, wherein Leiris disdains the mission's methods and achievements, allows critics like Ruth Larson to claim that Leiris maintains a critical distance from French ethnography's colonialist logic, anticipating his later support for African decolonization. By recording how some 3,000 artifacts were “acquired” during the mission, for example, she claims that Leiris' journal not only signals the author's departure from a mythic Africa whose phantom grows ever fainter, but also from the colonial logic that Marcel Griaule's ethnography and the Dakar-Djibouti mission itself presumed. Thus, *L'Afrique fantôme* represents ethnography's resistance to colonization, if not an advance in decolonization itself, challenging the prevalent belief that ethnography was wholly the scientific instrument of colonization (see Larson “Ethnography, Thievery, and Cultural Identity: A Rereading of Michel Leiris's *L'Afrique fantôme*.” *PMLA* 112, no. 2 (1997): 229-42; and “Michel Leiris: Race, Poetry, Politics: Rereading the Mission Lucas.” *SubStance: A Review of Theory and Literary Criticism* 32, no. 3 [102] (2003): 133-45. While Larson's claims are compelling, they are dismissive of Leiris' ostensible exoticism found in other writings of the period and how they might lend themselves to colonialist fantasy.

d'observateur, dans des circonstances où il faudrait s'abandonner."<sup>38</sup> To avoid the "inhumanity" of the ethnographic observer and become a better ethnographer overall, one must abandon oneself (*s'abandonner*) to certain religious rites and rituals (like sacrifice) in order to study them. To abandon oneself to the object of study is to become "humane," and to become so, in turn, is to (re)emerge as a better ethnographer. Leiris' here argues less the unavoidable subjectivity of ethnography than the necessity of the ethnographer-subject to sacrifice itself in order to become itself.

Even in this radical reevaluation of ethnographic method, however, it is nevertheless possible to trace the very same humanism in his claim for ethnography's "inhumanity": ethnography becomes inhumane because its insistence on objectivity bars the ethnographer from participation in rites that, to be fully grasped, demand the cool distance of the scientist be abandoned. The passive reportage of the observer--which was formerly the means of transcending subjectivity in "L'oeil de l'ethnologue"--now presents *itself* a limit to be transcended. Likewise, on April 4th, 1932, Leiris writes that true objectivity can only be reached at the limit of subjective experience in a state of "paroxysm." The object no longer precludes the subject, but rather reveals itself at the height of subjective experience. This will be, he writes, the "thesis" of the preface for the manuscript of *L'Afrique fantôme*, that "c'est par la subjectivité (portée à son paroxysme) qu'on touche à l'objectivité. Plus simplement: écrivant subjectivement j'augmente la valeur de mon témoignage, en montrant qu'à chaque instant je sais à quoi m'en tenir sur ma valeur comme témoin."<sup>39</sup> The ethnographic objectivity formerly sought in self-denial, self-conscious opposition to one's own subjective bearing, is now found in the attempt to confront the limits of subjective observation. The ethnographer subject thereby confers greater value (*augmenter la valeur*) on the object by reaching paroxysm--i.e., the limit of

<sup>38</sup> Leiris, *L'Afrique fantôme*, 433. Emphasis mine.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 263.

subjectivity itself--for the proper witnessing (*témoin, témoignage*) of the object beyond it.

Despite Leiris' reevaluation of ethnographic method, in other words, the "humanism" of ethnographic endeavor remains ironically quite similar. Whereas the humanism of ethnography formerly demanded self-denial through transcendence, it now requires complete self-loss through paroxysm. Yet both seek out the same "humane" goal: to sacrifice subjectivity in the effort to capture the unique otherness of the object. The former method became "inhumane" not because it actually transcended subjectivity, but rather because it *reified* it; in other words, over and against the subjectivity the ethnographer was supposed to deny arose a *supervenient* subjectivity which, through safeguarding the rules of (Griaule's) method, ironically limited access to the object. Barring thus the ethnographer subject from the alterity the object represents--an alterity which it must nevertheless seek--becomes thus oppressive, "inhuman." The new and true humanity of Leiris' ethnographer subject is contrarily found in actually ceding itself to the object, its other. And yet, by ceding itself to the object in this manner, this subject nevertheless properly recaptures its identity as a better or more "humane" ethnographer. In essence, the ethnographer-subject must strive for paroxysm and thus abandon itself, *sacrifice* itself, in order to become itself, i.e., the "humane ethnographer." Indeed this is the very same aporetic logic Leiris will later associate with religion, eroticism, and bullfighting, which likewise seek out self-sacrifice. "Un sacrifice tend vers son *paroxysme*: la mise à mort," he writes, "comme après la possession de l'objet désiré."<sup>40</sup> Leiris' more "humane," "sacrificial" ethnography thus differs from Griaule's insofar as the former does not oppose the object to the subject, but rather posits objectivity within the ethnographer's own subjective horizon as a form of radical self-estrangement.

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<sup>40</sup> Michel Leiris, *Miroir de la tauromachie* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1981), 58. Emphasis mine.

Brought within such a horizon, however, Leiris' humane self-estrangement is no longer strange to personal fantasy, dream, and desire. Such is the double-bind in his search to be more objective or humane: the radical alterity of the object gets confounded with the *desire for* this object, recalling the influence of his early surrealism. Indeed, Leiris' stated reasons for going to Africa in "L'oeil de l'ethnologue," *L'Afrique fantôme*, and *L'Âge d'homme* often eschew the rhetoric of benign humanism and indulge in a more dreamlike exoticism. As Leiris suggests in "L'oeil de l'ethnologue," his journey to Africa will be as real as it is fantastic--indeed it will *make* the fantastic real--through

l'accomplissement de certains rêves d'enfance, en même temps qu'un moyen de lutter contre la vieillesse et la mort en se jetant à corps perdu dans l'espace pour échapper imaginativement à la marche du temps (en oubliant aussi sa propre personnalité transitoire par la prise d'un contact concret avec un grand nombre d'hommes apparemment très différents)...<sup>41</sup>

To be unbiased and transcend the limited (*limitée*) preoccupations and prejudices of the European observer, Leiris the ethnographer must wholly project himself into an ageless space of escape (*se jeter à corps perdu*), forget himself (*oublier sa propre personnalité*), and be carried away to a childhood dream (*rêves d'enfance, imaginativement*) or an otherworldly realm--a *surreal* realm--in which the familiar becomes unfamiliar. In essence, the ethnographer must attempt a certain transgression. And yet from this elevated, quixotic realm of radical estrangement, he arrives not only a "concrete" (*concret*) engagement with others, but at a more fully human state (*de manière à devenir assez largement humains*) that he wishes his colleagues to share.

This humanism resurges in *Brisées* in his response to Lew Leslie's 1928

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<sup>41</sup> Leiris, "L'oeil de l'ethnologue: a propos de la mission Dakar-Djibouti," 413.



minstrel revue *Black Birds*: “*Black Birds* nous ramènent très en déca de l’art, à un point du développement *humain* ou ne s’est pas encore hypertrophiée cette conception bâtarde, fruit des amours illégitimes de la magie et du jeu libre.”<sup>42</sup> In essence, *Black Birds* is more “human” because it is more primitive, less “developed” (*développement*), being “magical” (*magique*), “free” (*libre*) and, most importantly, immanent to true art (*très en deçà*). According to a his quasi-Rousseauian logic, an undeveloped art ironically leads to a more fully developed humanity. Echoing his ironic formulation is the conclusion to “L’œil de l’ethnographe,” where he calls upon his “literary and artistic friends” to forget their “mediocre, little white ways” (*médiocres petites manières de blancs*) and thereby become, as ethnographers, not impartial scientists but the great Songhai hero of legend who forgets himself, asking “et moi, qui suis-je?”<sup>43</sup>

Leiris’ “L’œil de l’ethnographe” thus presents an irony: in pleading for the unbiased, humane science that is ethnography, Leiris evokes the all the racial bias of interwar negrophilia. To become an ethnographer means to forget oneself (as a European), to forget oneself is to emulate an African hero, and to become so, in turn, is to become “more generally human.” To wit, the self-estrangement and disidentification of Leiris’ ethnographer hardly differs from a form of “self-africanizing,” however fetishized or fantastic, whereby one becomes “more” than one is paradoxically by questioning the “one” that one is (*qui suis-je?*). The mythic “Africanness” so-acquired--one of otherness and self-estrangement--conjures in turn all the magic, mystery, and marvel of surrealism. Despite his desire for ethnographic objectivity, Leiris’ passage from 1920s surrealism to the sacred of the late 1930s paves a path on which the exotic, the occult, and the marvelous commonly dissolve in

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<sup>42</sup> Michel Leiris, *Brisées* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1966), 29.

<sup>43</sup> Leiris, “L’œil de l’ethnographe: a propos de la mission Dakar-Djibouti,” 414.

what I would call Leiris' "self-sacrificial humanism."<sup>44</sup> Again, he claims in "L'oeil de l'ethnographe" that ethnography is "la plus *généralement humaine*, parce que, non limitée--ainsi que la plupart des autres--aux hommes blancs." The ethnographer traverses the parochial limits of (white) racial, national, and cultural identity in his/her pursuit of otherness.

This is not unlike the surrealist pursuit of the marvelous (*merveilleux*), which likewise transcends local differences and broaches a universal humanity. Leiris writes in his earlier essay "A propos du musée des sorcières" (1929) for example that "c'est ni dans la nature, ni au delà de la nature que le Merveilleux existe, mais *intérieurement à l'homme*, dans la région la plus lointaine en apparence, mais sans doute en réalité la plus proche de lui-même." It is moreover

cette passion du merveilleux dont on retrouve la trace chez presque tous les hommes...qui explique non seulement pour une part la persistance de l'esprit religieux envers et contre tous les démentis...infligés aux diverses religions, mais encore le crédit qu'ont rencontré à toutes les époques les sciences occultes, ainsi que les pratiques magiques et superstitieuses."<sup>45</sup>

The pursuit of the marvelous, common to (almost) all men (*chez presque tous les hommes*), bespeaks of an intimate yet elusive humanity underlying sacred practices, magical, religious, or occult. And this humanity, in turn, is not unlike that of ethnographer's eye or the Africanness of *Black Birds*: all commonly seek the strange within the familiar or *make* the familiar strange, such that humanity describes not a

<sup>44</sup> In her article "Poésie/Ethnographie: Michel Leiris et l'Afrique," Veronique Flambard-Weisbart characterizes the sacrificial dimension of this humanism nicely when she states that through his "transition du regard subjectif de l'écrivain au regard objectif de l'ethnographe," Leiris hoped "non seulement échapper à lui-même, mais encore et surtout s'ouvrir à une cause plus humaniste" (Veronique Flambard-Weisbart, "Poesie/Ethnographie: Michel Leiris et l'Afrique," *Francographies: Bulletin de la Société des Professeurs Français et Francophones d'Amerique* 2 Special [1993]: 166). The "self-escape" that enables objectivity and humanism parallels the tropes of self-abandon and self-sacrifice found later in *L'homme sans honneur* and *Miroir de la tauromachie*.

<sup>45</sup> Michel Leiris, "A propos du "musée des sorcières"," in *Documents: archéologie, beaux-arts, ethnographie, variétés*, ed. Georges Bataille (Paris: Jean Michel Place, 1991), 109-10. Emphasis mine.

universal identity, but rather a kind of universal self-estrangement, a “commonly uncommon” alterity that precedes and conditions human identity itself. Thus, Leiris’ exoticism and negrophilia serve less to augment the (European) subject through fetishistic fantasy than subdue this subject through self-questioning--indeed through engaging a certain “marvelous” religiosity, exoticism, or Africanness--within.

To the extent that Africa or “Africanness” is a fetishized figure for humanism, therefore, it results contrast with those typical of fetishism. The desires of the fetishist do not triumph over “his” trepidation before the threatening object. Instead, the threat of the object is realized, even embraced, through successfully compromising the fetishist and his defensive disavowal of this threat. Leiris therefore presents a more radical form of fetishism that redefines the relationship between the fetishist and the fetish. This fetishism challenges the more normative critical assessment found for example in *Predicament of Culture*, where Clifford claims that Leiris “departed in 1931 with a structured aesthetic in mind, a vision of Africa, and a certain (essentially fetishist) conception of how ‘it’ should be collected and represented.”<sup>46</sup> Leiris’ own writings on the subject offer greater insight into the unusual consequences fetishism has on personal identity.

***Fetishism, or Facing the Other.*** Leiris first advances his own theory of fetishism in a brief 1929 *Documents* essay on Alberto Giacometti. Whereas traditional bourgeois art lends itself to what he calls a *fetishisme transposé*, an adulterated form of the fetish that reifies “moral, logical, and social imperatives” (*impératifs moraux, logiques et sociaux*), “true fetishism” (*le vrai fétichisme*) is something more animated, vital, and erotic. The inferior *fetishisme transposé* roughly resembles that of Marx’s commodity fetish, as it seems to engender or reflect dominant-hegemonic social relationships that Leiris will call a form of

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<sup>46</sup> Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture : Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, 137.

trickery (*duperie*). In contrast to this “fetishism of false-consciousness,” so to speak, true fetishism responds to:

amour...de nous-mêmes, projeté du dedans au dehors et revêtu d’une carapace solide qui l’emprisonne entre les limites d’une chose précise et le situe...dans la vaste chambre étrangère qui s’appelle l’espace.”<sup>47</sup>

More than a simple erotic, religious, or economic practice, the fetish for Leiris signifies love (*amour*), but this, in turn, belongs neither to the object proper nor to the fetishist subject, as it passes outside (*au dehors*) into empty space (*l’espace*) while yet being trapped (*emprisonner*) within the fragile shell (*carapace*) that defines the singularity of the thing (*chose précise, situer*).

The precise character of the fetish’s singularity is highly enigmatic, however, since everything else in the description suggests a kind of transcendence or omnipresence adverse to the “limites d’une chose précise.” This characterization uncannily anticipates Jacques Lacan’s fetish as *objet petit a* which, much like his Ideal-Ego represents less another object or thing *strictu sensu* than a narcissistic projection. Leiris’ comments above suggest the fetish to be a fantastic, albeit empty signifier, a sign for nothing but the vacuous “no-thing” (*chambre étrangère, l’espace*) of what Lacan later calls “primary lack.” On the other hand, the fetish object’s “solid shell” (*carapace solide*) and delimitation (*limites*) might also suggest the phallic defensive disavowal, the “je sais bien, mais quand même” as found in the fetishism of Sigmund Freud and Octave Mannoni. Whereas in these cases the fetish defensively maps the subject’s desire onto the castrating object (in the form of a phallus), I would argue that Leiris’ fetishism effects the inverse: the fetish transforms the would-be subject through a “face-to-face” confrontation with the object, which represents for Leiris a lack both immanent and transcendent. If normative fetishism describes a form

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<sup>47</sup> Michel Leiris, “Alberto Giacometti,” in *Documents: archéologie, beaux-arts, ethnographie, variétés*, vol. 1, 209.

of disavowal, Leiris' describes instead a "double-disavowal" that treads along the path of a negative dialectics.<sup>48</sup>

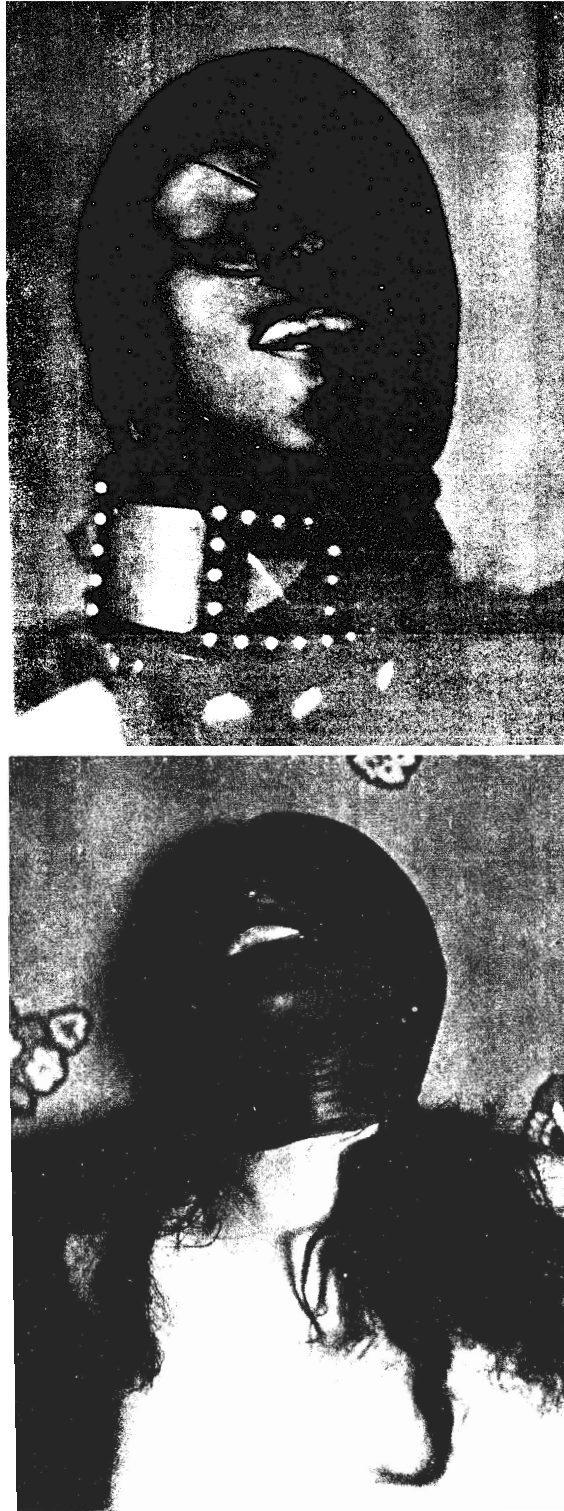
This formulation would come to be more fully articulated in a largely ignored and somewhat misunderstood *Documents* essay, "Le 'caput mortuum' ou la femme de l'alchimiste." In this brief essay from 1930, Leiris recounts his correspondence and conversations with the American journalist, occultist, and explorer William Seabrook. As a writer and an amateur ethnographer in his own right, Seabrook had much to share with Leiris, including (according to the latter's account) his passion for the occult and "love of blacks" (*les nègres*). As Leiris was quick to learn in their 1930 encounter in a café near Theatre de l'Odéon, they held more than career interests in common. They were both skeptical "en ce qui concerne l'intérêt de la civilisation occidentale moderne," and shared a common belief that one of the greatest singular achievements one can accomplish is "l'abolition, par quelque moyen que ce soit (mysticisme, folie, aventure, poésie, érotisme...), de cette insupportable dualité établie, grâce aux soins de notre morale courante, entre le corps et âme, la matière et l'esprit."<sup>49</sup> In their common aversion and redress to this modern Cartesianism, both Seabrook and Leiris turned to mysticism and the occult, but whereas Leiris was only a student, Seabrook was an avid practitioner. One of the American's forays into ritual masquerade and disguise was documented graphically in a series of photographs sent to Leiris (**Figure 4.1**), who would use them as the centerpiece of "Le caput mortuum."

As the very title suggests, Leiris endeavors to promote the mystical qualities of fetishistic practice which, he claims, fuse together the practices of religion and

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<sup>48</sup> The castration-complex or Lacanian Real would be fair descriptors for this alterity, though Leiris' himself will defer to Hegelian nomenclature by explaining the fetish to be the Thing-in-itself. Many critics (like Derrida) insist that these psychoanalytic categories are likewise phallogocentric or narcissistic, insofar as they still afford femininity no actual subject-position and privilege the phallus as the "primary signifier"; a similar phallogocentrism appears in Leiris' essay, insofar as he identifies with the male fetishist's desire. The results of this desire, however, ultimately subvert this phallogocentrism.

<sup>49</sup> ———, "Le caput mortuum, ou la femme de l'alchimiste," in *Documents: archéologie, beaux-arts, ethnographie, variétés*, vol. 2, 462.



**Figure 4.1.** W.B. Seabrook, *Untitled*. Personal photos taken of woman in leather mask featured in Leiris' essay "Le 'caput mortuum' ou la femme de l'alchimiste," from *Documents* 8, 1930.

eroticism. In turn, he implicitly redresses the “insupportable dualité” mentioned above, placing both body and spirit into a common space, indeed a *divine* space, of self-estrangement. Emblematic of this transposition is his example of the dervish mystic who confronts the face of God in a vision and recognizes this face to be his very own. Leiris’ essay obliquely gestures toward a similar confrontation for the Cartesian dualism described above, which is followed by a series of parallel dichotomies between male and female, fetishist and fetishized, identity and disguise, familiarity and estrangement, God and man. In the self-estrangement effected by (Leiris’) fetishism, each of these categories is ultimately challenged, as is, I would claim, the apparent exoticism and misogyny of the examples used. Other than the so-called *femme de l’alchimiste*, three other fetishized examples—a dervish mystic, Nerval’s Knight in *Aurélia*, and Hegel’s *caput mortuum*—illustrate the “alchemic” qualities he finds in fetishism itself. Peripheral to these examples but also implicitly fetishized is his love of “les nègres,” reprising his romantic representations of Africa elsewhere. Able to transmute identity into otherness, otherness into God, and God into identity *qua* otherness, Leiris’ fetishism (*contra* Freud) is unique I argue for its embrace of the dismembered subject *over* the fetishized object or, perhaps more precisely, its embrace of the dismembered subject *as* a fetishized object. In other words, Leiris’ fetishism reveals how the fetishistic (male) subject is itself originally hardly more than a dismembered, fetishized (female) object. Insofar as any particular thing can become fetishized, the thing will conversely reveal a fetishism prior to subjective desire and personal identity. In the masquerade of identity that is fetishism for Leiris, each of these is, in essence, the masked alter-ego of the Other--*as* other. This unique formulation of fetishism helps to illuminate the kindred moments of exoticism and misogyny found here and elsewhere in Leiris.

Leiris' reference to Hegel's hermetic metaphor of the *caput mortuum* is illustrative, not only for accentuating the article's emphasis on mysticism and the marvelous, but for anticipating the non-dialectical evocations of identity that would predominate later in his work and that of Georges Bataille. Leiris' emphasis on the "obscurity" and "estrangement" of Hegel's *caput mortuum* prefigures the general thrust of Bataille's own famous argument in "Hegel, la mort, et le sacrifice" (1955), for example, wherein negativity and death in Hegel are the focus rather than the dialectical triumph of Absolute Spirit. Though Hegel draws widely from the hermetic tradition in advancing his philosophy, the *caput mortuum* serves as a privileged symbol of unresolved dialectics in the *Encyclopedia Logic* and the *Philosophy of Nature*.<sup>50</sup> Hegel first makes mention of the *caput mortuum* in the *Encyclopedia Logic* in the section entitled "The Second Position of Thought with Respect to Objectivity," the very section Leiris obliquely references at the end of his essay. In this section, Hegel seeks to advance his critique of Kant's critical philosophy, especially with regard to knowledge of the Thing-in-Itself. The Kantian categories of the Understanding, Hegel claims, provide for a fettered epistemology, one unable to realize full consciousness of the Absolute. The Thing-in-Itself is a privileged example in this critique; posited as something that simply exceeds knowledge and consciousness, the Kantian Thing-in-Itself takes the form of a "negative" manifestation or residue much like the alchemists' *caput mortuum*, a useless waste-product made in the industry of consciousness. Yet Hegel seeks to recuperate this waste as a form of dialectical energy by sublimating it, in typically Hegelian fashion, into the ongoing march of self-consciousness:

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<sup>50</sup> Hegel's use of the *caput mortuum* and other hermetic concepts is nicely elaborated in Glenn Alexander Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).



The *thing-in-itself* (and here “thing” embraces God, or the spirit, as well) expresses the ob-ject, inasmuch as *abstraction* is made of all that it is for consciousness, of all determinations of feeling, as well as of all determinate thoughts about it. It is easy to see what is left, namely what is *completely abstract*, or totally *empty*, and determined only as what is “beyond”; the negative of representation, of feeling, of determinate thinking, etc. But it is just as simple to reflect that this *caput mortuum* is itself only *the product* of thinking, and precisely of the thinking that has gone to the extreme of pure abstraction, the product of the empty “I” that makes its own empty *self-identity* into its *ob-ject*.<sup>51</sup>

In other words, the radical negativity of the Thing-in-Itself, its resolute arrest of all “determinate thinking” in the form of a pure abstraction, is *itself* a determination for Hegel, one no more obscure than any other determination. Thus Hegel’s ironic sentiment near the end of the section, where he famously states that “we must be quite surprised, therefore, to read so often that one does not know what the Thing-in-Itself is; for nothing is easier to know than this.”<sup>52</sup> The determination of the indeterminate, the “abstract,” the “empty” transforms the Thing-in-Itself into a “product” of consciousness, and therefore an inextricable part of the common process that ultimately reveals spirit, God, and self-identity to be one. In essence, the *caput mortuum* “masks” the realization of Absolute in Hegel, what one might call the “true face” of identity.

Thus Leiris’ cryptic conclusion concerning the *caput mortuum*: “tout semble pourri quand tout est régénérée.” Beneath the “deadhead,” the fetishized, degenerate masquerade of negativity that is the Thing-in-Itself lies the renaissance of self-identity: the fully exposed, naked whole in itself and *for* itself, according to the Hegelian

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<sup>51</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel et al., *The Encyclopaedia Logic, with the Zusätze : Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), 87. See also the section entitled “The Doctrine of Essence,” Hegel claims that the negativity attributed to the Thing-in-Itself is not a useless consequence or byproduct, but rather a constitutive, internal feature of the thing in its “truth,” its “essence,” that makes it a manifestation of the Absolute.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

formula. In this vein, it would initially seem that Leiris himself is fetishizing Hegel or masquerading as a Hegelian, seeking to unveil the hidden, fantastic truth beneath the dead remains of the *caput mortuum*. Such would be comparable to Gilles Deleuze's understanding of Freudian fetishism in his essay "Le froid et le cruel," wherein the fetish represents the idealized dialectical resolution of phallic fantasy and castration.<sup>53</sup> Despite his use of the metaphor, however, Leiris' purpose is ultimately quite un-Hegelian. Whereas for Hegel the *caput mortuum* indicates a misstep in the alchemy of dialectics, a byproduct of false consciousness that, once recognized as such, enables the march of self-consciousness to move on, Leiris takes it to be a threshold, a limit, a form of abject waste from which identity itself is derived.<sup>54</sup> For Hegel, in other words, the *caput mortuum* is an illusion to be vanquished, a problem to be solved, an error to be fixed, since it represents not only the mistaken foreclosure of thought, Essence, or the Absolute, but indeed of identity *itself* and the entire dialectical system upon which it rests. It is to be *overcome* as something wasteful and illusory in the dialectic of self-identity. For Leiris, however, such illusion and waste represent the vexing, mysterious, and enchanting origin of all self-identity in non-identity, i.e. the Thing-in-Itself, that which is "énigmatique et attirante autant qu'un sphinx ou une sirène."<sup>55</sup> On the one hand fearsome (for Hegel), on the other fascinating (for Leiris), the Thing-in-Itself, that which fetishism produces in *sacrificing* the whole for the part, seems itself sacred, a form of taboo at once sexual and religious.

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<sup>53</sup> The following passage from Deleuze's excellent analysis explains the dialectical movement of fetishism he finds in Freud: "Il apparaît en ce sens que le fétichisme est d'abord dénégation...; en second lieu, neutralisation défensive...; en troisième lieu, neutralisation protectrice, idéalisante (car...[il] se neutralise ou se suspend dans l'idéal, pour mieux annuler les atteints que la connaissance de la réalité pourrait lui porter)." See Gilles Deleuze and Leopold Sacher-Masoch, *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch, le froid et le cruel, avec le texte intégral de la Vénus à la fourrure* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1967), 30.

<sup>54</sup> Hegel et al., *The Encyclopaedia Logic, with the Zusätze : Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*, 175.

<sup>55</sup> Leiris, "Le caput mortuum, ou la femme de l'alchimiste," 465.

Given this more elusive understanding of the Thing-in-Itself, and despite his reference to Hegel, it might seem that Leiris embraces a more Kantian vision of the fetishized Thing-in-Itself as something opaque, mysterious, and unknowable to the subject--yet this too is not precise. In contrast to Kant, Leiris seeks this estrangement not only in the fetishized Thing-in-Itself, but in the subject-fetishist and the consequent self-estrangement effected by the fetish. Leiris' fetishism emphasizes neither the unknowable transcendence of the Thing-in-Itself (*à la* Kant), nor the triumphal transcendence of the fetishist's desire over the object (*à la* psychoanalysis), nor even the reconciliation of phallic disavowal and castration (*à la* Deleuze), but rather a common estrangement existing *before* subject and object are put into dialectical relation. This, if any, is the "dialectical negation" Leiris' evokes in "Le caput mortuum"; it is not so much the reconciliation of subject with object, the Thing-for-itself with the Thing-in-Itself, but rather the irreconcilable estrangement each bears within and *before* being for-itself, in-itself. In other words, each wears the mask of the Other *before* the masked other.

To be sure, the fetishistic violence visited upon women for illustrating such otherness in this essay cannot be understated. Leiris' critique of fetishism itself fetishizes women in violent ways that can be read as either inimical or complementary to his argument. He identifies, for example, with the sadistic sexual partner who derives pleasure from the masked woman's pain. Though the dervish or Nerval's knight might illustrate the self-estrangement and divine alterity he sees in fetishism, Leiris instead describes a quasi-masturbatory, misogynistic vision of the masked woman as she transforms from subject to object, object to other, other to God in a way analogous to the dervish. This vision suggests a sacrifice of the masked woman in which the violent means, avowedly cruel (*cruauté*), sadistic (*sadique*), evil (*satanique*) end in a form of communion with God:

Outre qu'elle souffre sous le cuir, qu'elle est vexée et mortifiée (ce qui doit satisfaire nos désirs de puissance et notre fondamentale cruauté), sa tête--signe de son individualité et son intelligence--est insultée et niée. Devant elle, le partenaire...se trouve en mesure d'user, avec quel plaisir sacrilège d'une simple et universelle mécanique érotique! Cette même joie que devait ressentir le jeune derviche...en supprimant le visage de Dieu pour substituer à celui-ci son propre visage, le partenaire de la femme ainsi masquée doit l'éprouver...Belle comme la vache Hathor, la femme masquée telle un bourreau--ou, telle une reine, décapitée--se dresse; et, se tenant debout droit devant elle avec sa face devenue celle d'un Dieu, le partenaire admire son corps, rendu encore plus magnifique par l'absence de visage...la transforme graduellement en une sorte de *chose en soi* obscure...<sup>56</sup>

A resistant, feminist reading of Leiris' scenario above would likely proclaim that Leiris' fetishism is nothing new or different: women are the faceless sex objects, men the sadistic sexual subjects who derive pleasure from the woman's pain. A more subtle and sympathetic reading, however, would suggest that the fetish object is ultimately not feminine at all. Despite the obvious misogyny of the description, Leiris creates a complex series of metonymic equivalences that challenge the dualism existing between the male fetishist (i.e., Leiris or the *partenaire*) and the fetishized object (the masked woman). Likewise, the religious and erotic goal of male desire described in the narrative becomes enveloped within its violent means. As a result, the sadism and misogyny of the vision are more ironical and less straightforward. First, the erotic role-play of the masked woman and her male partner is compared to the dervish's own divine self-confrontation, wherein the dualism of male/female, fetishist/fetishized is either not found or confounded in the same site of selfhood. As such, it is suggested that these sexual partners are parts of a larger whole--i.e., the erotic act, fetishism,

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. This description continues in the subsequent paragraph wherein he dissects the masked woman into crude body parts. These parts, however, recuperate a divine, transcendent "whole" the otherwise integral body forbids. Fetishism is thus "une manière aussi de conjurer les forces mauvaises et de braver Dieu ou ses succédanés, cerbères du monde...dans une de ses parcelles particulièrement significatives, mais *qui n'est plus différenciée*" (emphasis mine). By dissecting the body into parts and "things," Leiris suggests that God is found in what Bataille later called a "base materialism." See Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Michel Foucault (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), vol. I, 225.

even God--that is somehow estranged from itself, just like the dervish is from himself, Nerval's Knight is from himself, or the masked woman is from her true face. The actual position of the fetishist partner is also strange, since the masked woman mutates into both an executioner and victim (*masquée telle un bourreau, ou telle une reine, décapitée*). These equivalences and reversals suggest less that the mask fetishizes the woman for the male-other than that the mask, as it were, accentuates her otherness to herself *as well as* to her partner. While this doubling is the desired effect for Leiris (*plaisir sacrilège*), it also ironically subverts the privileged position of the woman's sadistic partner as well as Leiris' identification with him, insofar as the mask transforms the fetishized woman into an infinite multiplicity of possible partners with mutable genders, sexualities, and subject positions. The following questions therefore arise: does such identification support or challenge the partner's sadistic, heterosexual masculinity? Similarly, does the first-person plurality of "nos desirs" and "notre fondamentale cruauté" describe a unified, sadistic, heterosexual, masculine identity, or rather a mutable position that traverses the different gendered and sexual identities as conjured *through* the fetish itself? The fetish effects a chimerical assemblage of different identities animal and divine, executed and victimized not unlike "un sphinx ou une sirène."<sup>57</sup>

Thus the ultimate irony of Leiris' fetishism: its power and effect derives less from masking the true identity of the object than from unmasking the greater truth that there is none in particular. "Depuis la simple parure," he writes, "il semble bien que l'homme, à peine a-t-il pris conscience de sa peau, n'ait rien de plus pressé que d'en changer, se précipitant tête baissée dans une excitante métamorphose."<sup>58</sup> Man (*l'homme*) is just as swift to determine his identity as he is to change it; he is always "paired" in some sense, beside himself (*parure, par, paire*). But if this is the case, it

<sup>57</sup> Leiris, "Le caput mortuum, ou la femme de l'alchimiste," 465.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 463.

seems unclear which identity, which “skin” (*peau*) is first noticed (*prendre conscience*) and which is the result of a masquerade or metamorphosis, wherein one “s’affranchir de ses étroites limites en revêtant *une autre peau*.”<sup>59</sup> The “skin” so discovered, i.e., one’s “original” identity, seems hardly different from the “other skin” (*autre peau*) of masquerade that one assumes immediately afterward. This suggests that the identity presumed original is *itself* hardly more than a skin, a playful masquerade, and such is the *divine* nature of Leiris’ fetishism. The sacred quality of fetishism is found essentially in its masquerade, its *performativity*.

Indeed, there is no greater evidence for this than the essay itself, which performatively contradicts the fetishist through his own fetishism. Like the dervish or Nerval’s knight, his masked woman thus confronts herself as he confronts her; each stands before the Other as if before God, indeed *as* God, in combined condemnation and apotheosis: she “se dresse; et, se tenant debout droit devant elle avec sa face devenue celle d’un Dieu.” The French reflexives (*se dresser*, *se tenir*) fruitfully emphasize the ambiguous subject-object position of the fetishist and the fetish which, through masquerade, trade places not only with each other but with divine otherness itself. It is thus a form of “true eroticism” (*vrai érotisme*) which, as he later explains, is “un moyen de sortir de soi.”<sup>60</sup> With such self-escape and self-estrangement arises the queer shift in Leiris’ fetishism from misogyny to multiplicity, feminine object to masculine subject, victim to executioner.

Whereas normative fetishism emphasizes the reification of the desired object, fetishism for Leiris emphasizes how this transformation itself transforms the subject. As such, it ultimately represents a coincident estrangement between the subject and object and each to itself. This is, perhaps, the more precise meaning of “love” in his essay on Giacommetti or that of *L’Age d’homme* years later, which represents the

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 465. Emphasis mine.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 465-6.

“seule possibilité de coïncidence entre le sujet et l’objet, seul moyen d’accéder au sacré que représente l’objet convoité dans la mesure où il nous est un monde extérieur et étrange.”<sup>61</sup> Such a coincidence marks not only transient meeting of two lovers or beloveds, but the divination of oneself and the Other as participants in a common masquerade wherein multiple lovers and beloveds become possible for one and all. To the extent that Leiris fetishizes in his writing, he fetishizes others (Africa, women, etc.) as much as he does himself, disavowing the identity of the other such that his own identity is disavowed. The effects of this double-disavowal are not *purely* negative, however, insofar as it compels *ad seriatim* an ever-renewed form of identity: God, man, woman, victim, executioner.

***Other Africas.*** As many critics have noted, Africa is often a frequently fetishized figure for Leiris all throughout the 1930s, even after his two-year ethnographic journey. At times, this fetishism transcends the playful fancy of imagination and broaches the most vulgar racist or colonialist sentiments. From his early essays in *Documents* to *L’Age d’homme*, Africa, its peoples, and its culture are frequently represented as beatific, prelapsarian, infantilized, and idealized.<sup>62</sup> These representations of Africa in Leiris’ more aesthetic writings make it possible to trace the tendencies that, by the late 30s, will more forcefully appear in his writings on the sacred, and thus provide cause and context for reconsidering the function and effect of such representations.

*Documents* offers the earliest traces of the negrophilic fetishism that would endure in subsequent years. In the 1929 essay “Civilisation,” written after having seen Lew Leslie’s *Black Birds* at the Moulin Rouge, was a paean to the non-art of “nègres américains” which, contrary to the more bourgeois *beaux arts*, “plongent en nous des

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<sup>61</sup> ———, *L’Age d’homme*, 176.

<sup>62</sup> See Janis, *Africa after Modernism : Transitions in Literature, Media, and Philosophy*, 52. Janis describes the different modes of racist alterity in Leiris’ writings on Africa.

racines profondes et organiques, qui nous pénètrent...communiquant un sang plus fort.”<sup>63</sup> In the following issue, under the title “Spectacles nègres à New York,” there appears a note announcing that *Documents* is committed to “mettre nos lecteurs au courant des nouvelles productions des nègres des Etats-Unis, qu’il faudra...placer au premier rang de tout ce qu’on nous donne au monde à voir ou à entendre.”<sup>64</sup> In November 1929, Leiris publishes two reviews, one of W.B. Seabrook’s *The Magic Island* (on Haitian voodoo) and another of the Parisian show of the Bambara painter Kalifala Sidibé. In the Seabrook review, Leiris emphasizes the “hallucinatory identification” that occurs between man and animal in Haitian sacrifice. By this point, Leiris’ interest in African and negro culture takes a decidedly more mystical and religious turn; in the first issue of the following year (1930), he commented on the release of several new jazz records, which conjure a sublime “érotisme déchaîné” and “caractère d’horreur grandiose”; As a form of music that both frightens (*musique à faire peur*) and seduces (*musique à faire aimer*), jazz represents “la vraie musique sacrée” able to cast entire crowds into a state of trance.<sup>65</sup> This “sacred turn” in Leiris’ negrophilia, however, will come to complicate the more facile fetishism found earlier.

In his 1935 lyric poem from *Haut mal* entitled “La néréide de la mer Rouge,” for example, Africa becomes the fetish object of exoticism *par excellence*. As the analysis above already suggests, however, the consequences of such fetishism *do* challenge the subaltern position of African identity *vis à vis* European identity, as well as any essentialism that could be attributed to either form of identity. The journey of the European voyager in “La néréide,” for example, is indeed exoticized and primitivist, but *not* (by extension) supportive of a cultural logic promoting

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<sup>63</sup>Michel Leiris, “Civilization,” in *Documents: archéologie, beaux-arts, ethnographie, variétés*, vol. I, 222.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 285.

<sup>65</sup> ———, “Disques nouveaux,” in *Documents: archéologie, beaux-arts, ethnographie, variétés*, ed., vol. II, 48.



essentialism, hegemony, or colonialism.<sup>66</sup> The farthest reaches of Leiris' exoticist revery ultimately seek not Africa itself, nor even a European vision of Africa, but rather I would argue a nameless transnational land for which Europe and Africa are either different or confounded. If Africa indeed signifies an exotic otherness, an otherness often quasi-racist or misogynist, it is an otherness affording no secure subjective position to the would-be (European) subject. The primitivism of Leiris' Africa signifies less a romantic alternative to European identity than the possibility of multiple forms of "Europeanness" and "Africanness," if not different types cultural identity altogether. In this sense, I would agree with critic Michael Janis when he states that Leiris "gives rise to the pivotal questions on Africa and the West [and] the metaphysics of the exotic, in the expanded sense of the relation between self and other."<sup>67</sup> By extension, I would associate (for better or worse) Leiris' exoticism with what Victor Segalen has called an "aesthetics of diversity" (*l'esthétique du divers*), an exoticism that is not "une adaptation," nor "la compréhension parfaite d'un hors soi-même qu'on étreindrait en soi," but rather "la perception aiguë et immédiate d'une

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<sup>66</sup> In this way, I disagree with (many) critics like Romuald-Blaise Fonkoua and James Clifford, who place exoticism and colonialism in the same camp for Leiris. In his book *Les discours de voyages*, for example, Fonkoua writes that Leiris' emphasis on the heroism and bravery of the voyager into exotic worlds (like Africa) places him "dans un sous-ensemble coloniale." See Romuald-Blaise Fonkoua, *Les discours de voyages : Afrique, Antilles* (Paris: Karthala, 1999), 25.

<sup>67</sup> Janis, *Africa after Modernism : Transitions in Literature, Media, and Philosophy*, 45.

incompréhensibilité éternelle.”<sup>68</sup> This “eternal incomprehensibility” gets figured in the most fanciful forms, but such figuration represents Africa as much as Leiris’ own unknown self, confounding the exotic unknowns both inside and outside that are commonly never “perfectly understood” (*comprehension parfaite*). Both internal and external to the subject, Leiris’ exoticism short-circuits the more normative subaltern logic according to which exoticism traditionally operates. As Leiris himself states in an interview, “ce que j’aime beaucoup, c’est l’Autre qui n’est pas tout-a-fait un autre, l’Autre qui apparaît chez vous.”<sup>69</sup> As the cases to follow illustrate, this exoticism, both distant and intimate, becomes a constitutive feature of what Leiris will later call the sacred. “A savoir si, dans le sacré,” he writes in *L’homme sans honneur*, “il n’intervient pas toujours quelque chose d’exotique: idée d’un monde différent, d’un domaine sans commune mesure, d’un pays radicalement lointain.”<sup>70</sup>

In “La néréide de la mer Rouge,” Leiris sees the journey of his life allegorically through the lens of his travels from Marseille and Milan to Dakar and Djibouti. As this vital journey advances, so does the threat of danger and

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<sup>68</sup> Victor Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme : une esthétique du divers*, Explorations 8 (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1978), 38. Segalen’s reevaluation of exoticism challenges its normative association with cultural appropriation in the form of racist fantasy. Through the analysis of several colonial short stories, he claims that exoticism should be conceived as a kind of irreducible aesthetic encounter much like the Kantian sublime. The critical reception of Segalen’s “aesthetics of diversity” varies widely. In her introduction to the English translation, Yael Schlick claims that Segalen’s essay is a precursor to an aesthetics of cultural difference and appreciation. Edward Said comes to the opposite conclusion, allying Segalen with a highly orthodox colonial exoticism in Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 1st Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1994). Clifford’s assessment of Segalen in *Predicament of Culture* has a more mixed conclusion: “Segalen’s program of exoticism is a failure. There is no escape; neither is there a stable home. The failure enacted in Segalen’s poetics...is both an epitome and a critique of the white man’s relentless quest for himself” (Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture : Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, 163). I most agree with Clifford’s assessment, and I would group Leiris with Segalen as fellow “troubled” voyagers on “white man’s relentless quest”; both paradoxically critique exoticism ironically through committing exoticism in a performative contradiction.

<sup>69</sup> “Entretien avec M.Haggerty,” *Jazz Magazine*, no. 324, 1984, 35. By this, Leiris does not mean that the other is a narcissistic extension of himself, but rather that the other shares a common alterity particular to none. As he mentions earlier in *L’Age d’homme*, jazz music has the effect of capturing this common otherness.

<sup>70</sup> Leiris and Jamin, *L’homme sans honneur : notes pour le sacré dans la vie quotidienne : transcription et fac-similé*, 30.

dissolution; the greater his distance from Europe, the greater his proximity to death and the greater his ambivalent sentiments of fear and fascination. The parallels between Africa and femininity likewise become more apparent, tracing a common geography of exoticism, eroticism, myth, and fantasy. Such is the poet's sole companion on this wayward journey:

De l'Atlantique à la mer Rouge  
fuyant l'Europe  
le voyageur allait sans femme  
autre que les idoles pour qui des cierges flambaient dans sa tête  
et les sirènes imaginaires nageant  
dans l'eau obscure de ses yeux <sup>71</sup>

In essence, the voyager's desire is part of both his destination and departure; the sirens and idols of his odyssean journey fulgurate in his head (*flambaient dans sa tete*), swim in his eyes (*nageant dans...ses yeux*), and the vision of this fantastic future fittingly substitutes for a wife (*femme*). Already the feminine, the fantastic, and the unknown commingle in the surreal space of the voyager's imagination. In subsequent stanzas, Africa takes the place of this surreal space, evoking a sexist portrait of a fertile woman who willingly exposes herself (*se dénuder*) and surrenders her bounty:

L'Afrique se dénudait  
rejetant les bijoux qui tintaient entre ses seins proéminents  
et des chants la secouaient toute entière  
comme un vent de tornade  
tandis que le sang lourd des sacrifices coulait entre ses jambes suantes  
menstrues éternelles et violentes <sup>72</sup>

Leiris seems to present the fantasy of Africa as self-sacrificing mother who, rejecting the "shining jewels between her breasts" (*rejetant les bijoux qui tintaient entre ses seins*) is ready to be denuded and milked. Her so-called "blood of sacrifice" (*sang*

<sup>71</sup> Leiris, *Haut mal, suivi de Autres lancers*, 122.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 126.

*lourde des sacrifices*) is kin to the menstrual blood (*menstrues*) of a fertile womb found between “sweaty legs” (*jambes suantes*). It is as if Leiris is pleading for a willing Africa, ready to strip and surrender her fertile womb to a covetous colonial Europe. In her work on masculinity and colonialism, critic Nina Baym has suggested that exoticism, like Lieris’ above, often goes hand in hand with masculinist desires both colonial and sexual. “The role of the beckoning wilderness, the attractive landscape...is given a deeply feminine quality,” she writes, “where society is menacing and destructive, nature is compliant and supportive.”<sup>73</sup>

Challenging this initial interpretation and Baym’s critical position in this case, however, is that Africa’s wealth and fertility produce *nothing*: Africa “rejects” the jewels (*rejeter*), but doesn’t own them, make them, or give them away; she menstruates violently, eternally (*éternelles et violentes*), but begets no offspring. Its almost as if the violent shock of the singing (*des chants la secouaient*), tornado wind (*vent de tornade*), and “bloody sacrifice” leave nothing of Africa but a catastrophic, abject waste of blood and sweat, unfruitful, unyielding, and ultimately useless to the would-be colonialist. In this context, the meaning of the pronominal *se dénuder* becomes more ambiguous: was Africa stripped, or is Africa “stripping itself” somehow as a figure for prodigal waste personified? In the latter case, Africa represents less a fruitful and enchanting resource to be exploited than a completely barren absence, one that refuses all productivity and wealth for possible colonial appropriation. Africa’s “rejection” and “denudation,” thus understood, become a kind of prodigal (self-) sacrifice without without redemption. “African identity” thus becomes predicated on an exotic otherness, but this otherness is by no means *particular* to Africa, insofar as it becomes *shared* by the poet voyager.

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<sup>73</sup> Nina Baym, “Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors,” in *Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline*, ed. Lucy Maddox (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U, 1999), 126.

The proximity between Africa and the voyager, Africanness and Europeanness becomes more apparent in the subsequent stanzas on Gondar and Djibouti. These cities commonly evoke a hybrid topography of danger and desire, one that imperils the poet through a *shared* dissolution. In the following stanza, for example, the poet voyager and his Abyssinian beloved share a common fate:

Gondar  
huttes de paille et de pierres  
dans des ruines s'écroulant en morceaux  
Des jours durant  
j'y fus amoureux d'une Abyssine  
claire comme la paille  
froide comme la pierre  
Sa voix si pure me tordait bras et jambes  
A sa vue  
ma tête se lézardait  
et mon coeur s'écroulait  
lui aussi  
comme une ruine <sup>74</sup>

Gondar is a figure both singular and multiple; in the complex metonymy this stanza presents, “it” is at once different people, places, and things referring to a common referent that references these references themselves. Indeed the figure of ruins--a single place comprised of multiple parts--is much like metonymy itself. At first, Gondar is a ruins, with its dilapidated huts of straw and stone, but the sprawling straw and stone are also the beloved Abyssinian woman, frigid (*froide*) and sparse (*claire*), much like, as her name suggests, a foreboding “abyss.” This ruinous city-woman has a torturous effect on the poet, twisting his limbs (*tordait bras et jambes*), splitting his head (*tête se lézardait*), and causing his heart to crumble (*s'écrouler*)--just like the straw and stones of the woman and city. All is in common ruin, such that the identity of the speaker is ultimately itself “ruined”--not only in the sense of “destroyed,” but

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<sup>74</sup> Leiris, *Haut mal, suivi de Autres lancers*, 133.

also in the sense of being simultaneously *partial and whole*. This compromised identity is likewise seen in the poet's shifting gaze of the woman, whom he subsequently gazes *gazing at him* like a Gorgon, imperiling him (*A sa vue / ma tête se lézardait*). Indeed, Leiris' Gondar seems fetishized much in the manner of Freud's Medusa, wherein a phallic multiplicity (*bras, jambes, pailles*, etc.) ironically betrays the absence of the phallus. It is unclear, however, if Gondar is inscribed strictly within a phallic economy, since the European male speaker, like the Abyssinian, like the city itself, are found in a *common* ruination wherein identity is made only of broken parts. In the end, after all, it is not only the abyssal city or Abyssinian that he sees, but that he sees seeing him; is it this elusive gaze of an other that ultimately resists fetishism, or is its elusiveness itself a function of Leiris' own obscure brand of fetishism? Whichever the case, as both the subject and object of the gaze, the poet would seem both the fetishist and fetishized, part and whole, indeed even masculine and feminine, European and African.

The case of Djibouti in "La néréide de la mer Rouge" is equally equivocal. Djibouti offers the very same fetishism and violent femininity found in the figure of the Abyssinian. And, likewise, its effects are decisive for the poet who, beside himself, is lured there by his own shadow:

Djibouti  
 magma solaire  
 que la mer Rouge ronge comme un acide  
 Les femmes y ont l'odeur du lait de chèvre et la saveur du sel  
 Vorace chienne  
 mon ombre infatigable m'y conduit aujourd'hui <sup>75</sup>

In contrast to the more pastoral scene in Gondar, Djibouti is a dangerous place of infernal heat that even the Red Sea cannot soothe. The "magma solaire" suggests at

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

once the African sun and four major volcanos of Djibouti. Much like the destructive sun and volcanoes, the sea likewise “ronge comme un acide.” It is almost as if sun, sea, and earth are simultaneously competing and complementary forces of destruction. Alongside these threatening forces is ironically placed the erotic of allure of an enchanting femininity. By the fifth line of the stanza, which introduces a more threatening femininity, it is no longer clear which of the above the “voracious bitch” (*vorace chienne*) alludes to: is it the sea (*la mer*), the women (*les femmes*), or Djibouti itself, i.e, all of the above? Just when the poet seems to cast Djibouti in the form of a *femme fatale*, his “indefatigable shadow” arises as the unlikely cause for the strangely dangerous and desirable place he finds himself in. Is his shadow, the poet’s own Other, in its tireless pursuit for Djibouti, in some sense also possibly a “voracious bitch”? In other words, is it Djibouti, himself, or his very own shadow that presents the dangerous and alluring femininity found in the lines above? And does not this ambiguity, in turn, suggest multiple possible subject positions for the poet voyager as a man, woman, European, and/or African?

Leiris’ equivocal personification of Africa in “La néréide de la mer Rouge” suggests *at least* two “Africas”: on the one hand, Africa personifies an erotic femininity, maternal fruitfulness, and exotic fantasy; on the other, it presents a destructive wasteland that denies (colonial) fantasy and appropriation. Despite these racist alternatives--the one fantastic, the other fearsome--I would claim that there is ultimately no one or two Africas of which to speak, but many, as the recursive metonymic structure suggests. One might say that Leiris’ Africa is a land not only foreign to him, but somehow foreign to itself, *un pays dépaycé*, less because it signifies Europe’s Other or the absence of identity than identity’s eternal return. This is not unique to Africa however; there is likewise no single “European,” colonialist, or

ethnographic identity either for Leiris, indeed no particular subjectivity against which such Africa(ness) *or* Europe(anness) could be compared.

Much like Africa, jazz offers a similar form of shared self-estrangement for Leiris, as his essays in *Documents* already suggest. Later, in one of his many nostalgic moments in *L'Age d'homme*, he explains that the postwar era assumed a kind of venereal religiosity inspired by jazz, with which he again associates a racist primitivism:

Dans la période de grade licence qui suivit les hostilités, le jazz fut un signe de ralliement, un étendard orgiaque, aux couleurs du moment. Il agissait magiquement et son mode d'influence peut être comparé à une possession. C'était le meilleur élément pour donner leur vrai sens à ces fêtes, un sens *religieux*, avec communion par la danse, l'érotisme...et la boisson, moyen le plus efficace de niveler le fosse qui sépare les individus les uns des autres dans toute espèce de réunion...il passait dans le jazz...abandon à la joie animale de subir l'influence du rythme moderne, aspiration sous-jacente à une vie neuve...nous ravageait. Première manifestation des *nègres*, mythe des édens de couleur qui devait me mener jusqu'en Afrique et, par-delà l'Afrique, jusqu'à l'ethnographie.<sup>76</sup>

In a paratactic prose that itself reverberates with a jazzy “rythme moderne,” the magic, danse, orgy, animalism of Leiris’ post-war “possession” is closely tied not to the ethnographer’s science, but again to the European’s primitivist fantasy of Africanness. Within the anomic revery conjured in the description, however, it is not entirely clear who--or what--is possessing whom. Is the author the one possessed by

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<sup>76</sup> ———, *L'Age d'homme*, 162. In the 1950 préface to *L'Afrique fantôme*, Leiris writes “ces notes prises durant mon premier voyage en zone tropicale: répondant à un état d'esprit que j'estime avoir dépassé elles ont surtout pour moi valeur rétrospective de document quant à ce qu'un Européen de trente ans...poussé à voyager dans des contrées alors assez lointaines parce que cela signifiait pour lui...une poésie vécue et un dépaysement, peut avoir ressenti quand il traversa d'ouest en est cette Afrique noire...en s'étonnant--bien naïvement--de ne pas échapper à lui-même...” (———, *L'Afrique fantôme*, 14). Though Leiris admits to failing to “escape himself” (*échapper à lui-même*), he maintains that the trip to Africa was intended to serve as a form of fantasy and escape, one analogous to the “edens” he speaks of here in *L'Age d'homme*. That Leiris refers to himself in the third person is further illustrative of the argument here.



primitivism and fantasy, the one unwittingly lead (*devait me mener*) to an edenic Africa, or is it rather the author who “possesses”; is it he who actually “possesses this possession” so to speak in rhythmically recounting the jazzy rhythm of a negrophilic modernity that so possessed him?<sup>77</sup> Leiris’ description here is both a *report* and a *performance* of postwar exuberance and thus a contradiction, one that through jazz crosses the autobiographical gap (*niveler le fosse?*) between Leiris-the-writer and Lieris-the-written. One may therefore doubt the implied distance sought between the nostalgic 1939 Leiris of *L’Age d’homme* and the negrophilic Leiris of the 1920s. While the jazz and Africa are here, to be sure, the subordinated, cultural midwives of postwar communal rebirth, they are also the harbingers of a self-dissolution that forces submission (*subir*) and ravages (*ravager*) Leiris’ subjective, autobiographical agency. In this regard, the elision of the grammatical subject in the concluding sentence is suggestive; it underscores not only his flight of racist fancy, but also a flight *from* this fancy, the self-abandon (*abandon*) of the subject that paradoxically inspires its rebirth (*une vie neuve*) into an otherness (*communion, réunion*) for which Africanness, with its orgiastic music and colorful Edens, is the exemplar. As such, Africanness--whether in the form of jazz, ethnography, bacchanalia, or Africa itself--represents both the enchanting means (*mode d’influence, moyen*) and utopic end (*vie neuve, édens, jusqu’en Afrique/ethnographie*) of the subject’s transformation. The result, therefore, is a certain “africanization”--however fetishized or fantastic--of the subject itself *through* such transformative enchantment. For Leiris, Africanness is indeed a form

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<sup>77</sup> In her research on spirit possession in Leiris’ ethnography, critic Irene Albers claims that Leiris’ emulation of cultural behaviors (like the case of spirit possession) actually liberates the subject, hence overturning the dualism between subject and object. Concentrating on Leiris’ observation of the *zar* cults in Gondar, she agrees with critical consensus that they “have been described as performing a mimetic relation to alterity (Taussig) or as an ‘interpretation of the Other by mimesis’ (Kramer). Re-enacting the Other leads to a liberation from its power by means of imitation.” I would claim that this is also the case for Leiris’ more aesthetic and autobiographical writings of the 1930s as well, which exhibit literary representations of such phenomena. See Irene Albers, “Mimesis and Alterity: Michel Leiris’s Ethnography and the Poetics of Spirit Possession,” *French Studies: A Quarterly Review* LXII, no. 3 (2008): 271.

“possession” much like jazz: it represents an otherness operating within one’s identity, even an otherness that *becomes* one’s identity. To become “African,” in other words, one must also paradoxically become other than human, even “inhuman,” and “abandon oneself to animal joy” (*abandon à la joie animale*). Yet such “abandonment” means not only that such “Africanness” cannot be attained, but also that there is no single Africanness that can result from such abandon. In other words, the primitivist representation of African edens and animality actually advances, albeit through a performative contradiction, an *equally performative* form of identity critique in which Africa is *irreducible* to such representation. Yet Leiris’ representation of Africa and Africanness (both before and after the mission Dakar-Djibouti) make him distinctive, insofar he readily substitutes them--as he does *himself*--for such alterity. Such is the paradox of Leiris’ exoticism: exoticism highlights otherness, yet such otherness *transforms the subject* that exoticizes through a parallel confrontation with a (non-) identical otherness within. Just as Leiris’ his early exoticism cannot be denied, the implicit auto-critique of the subject position that posits these representations, therefore, cannot be either.

In subsequent years, however, especially after the Mission Lucas (1944-6), Leiris would make this auto-critique more explicit and eschew his former exoticism.<sup>78</sup> Africa becomes less an object of admiration and study, less a repository for fantasy than a complex geo-political and cultural area of diverse peoples inhumanely subjugated by colonial power. To mark the contrast with his Africa of the 1930s, he will express regret for his former descriptions and insist on a more sober and mature

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<sup>78</sup> As Ruth Larson explains, the Mission Lucas “marked a turning point in Leiris’ relations with Africa. Leiris later described how the political, economic, and social problems addressed during this voyage required him to look at Africa from a different position from the one he’d had in the 1930s: though he still considered himself a critic of colonialism, he was forced, and with considerable effort, he claimed, to get rid of his ‘romantisme’.” Leiris’ newfound commitment to the *Parti communiste français* would in part encourage this change of perspective. See Larson, “Michel Leiris: Race, Poetry, Politics: Rereading the Mission Lucas,” 133.

understanding of Africa. In his essay "Message de l'Afrique" (1947), he calls this new vision Africa an "Afrique bien réelle," though he cautiously resists defining precisely *what* this is. Rather than compare Africa to primitivist metaphors of women, edens, and mystery, which could potentially essentialize an "inessential" Other, Leiris defers to circumlocution and systrophe to articulate the identity of this "new Africa." Now, Africa is described negatively through omission:

*Je ne vous retracerai pas* ce que fut ce premier voyage de presque deux ans en Afrique, ce voyage qui...s'acheva en Abyssinie où j'ai eu la bonne fortune de vivre quelques mois dans l'intimité du culte des esprits zar, qui rappellent...les Iwa du vaudou haïtien. *Je ne vous raconterai pas* comment, de fil en aiguille et à mesure que je m'accoutumais à ce milieu nouveau, je cessai de regarder les Africains sous l'angle de l'exotisme, finissant par être plus attentif à ce qui les rapprochait des hommes des autres pays qu'aux traits culturels plus ou moins pittoresques qui les en différenciaient. *Je ne vous dirai pas* comment, après un second voyage...l'idée mythologique que m'étais faite de l'Afrique acheva de se dissiper et laissa place à une Afrique bien réelle.<sup>79</sup>

In the preamble to the 1950 edition of *L'Afrique fantôme*, Leiris echoes the regrets and reservations above and similarly implies an Africa quite different from the one described in the memoir. Again, the "real" Africa that was obscured by fantasy remains obscure due to a similar equivocation:

L'Afrique que j'ai parcourue dans la période d'entre les deux guerres *n'était déjà plus* l'Afrique héroïque des pionniers, *ni* même celle d'où Joseph Conrad a tiré son magnifique *Heart of Darkness*, mais elle était également bien *différente du* continent qu'on voit aujourd'hui sortir d'un long sommeil et, par des mouvements populaires *tels que* le Rassemblement Démocratique Africain, travailler à son émancipation. De ce côté--je serais tenté de le croire--doit être cherchée la raison pour laquelle je n'y trouvai qu'un fantôme.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Michel Leiris, "Message de l'Afrique," *Le musée vivant* 36 (1948): 5-6. Emphasis mine.

<sup>80</sup> Leiris, *L'Afrique fantôme*, 12. Emphasis mine.

The descriptions of Africa above are more prudent and reserved, deferring rather to the enunciation of its incomparable difference from the exotic associations made in the mind of a young European (*exotisme, pionniers, Heart of Darkness*, etc.). Leiris now emphasizes their local differences (*traits culturels*) and their plight as victims of colonization. Yet he is also careful not to reduce Africa to either a mere sociological challenge or a (Marxist) case for decolonization. This “real Africa” (*Afrique bien réel*), so much more than a mere phantom (*qu’un fantôme*), represents a complex multiplicity of traits that can only be represented negatively, through what it is *not*.

This fact reveals however that this “new” representation signifies less a change in *mode* than a change in *means*. In other words, Africa still represents a form of radical alterity, though the representation of this alterity has changed; Africa is now de-aestheticized, refusing capture by imagination and metaphor, representing instead a diverse multiplicity of “real” people, places, and events that cannot be adequately subsumed under the phantasmagoria of exoticist fantasy. In essence, Africa is now far less essentialized; it appears to signify a more heteronomous otherness, seemingly independent of reference to Leiris’ own problematic subjectivity. Africa is no longer Europe’s or Leiris’ exotic Other, but rather somehow other than this Other, as Levinas might say. And yet such independence can only be articulated through a certain negation or denial precipitated by the topic of Africa, one that still in effect calls into question the limits of Leiris’ own authorial agency and the limits of discourse. That he *will not* speak of his former exoticism, or that he *will* insist on Africa’s “real” difference from it, highlights not only Africa’s radical difference, but also the self-differentiation that Leiris must confront in representing Africa, i.e., the confrontation between Leiris of 1936 and the Leiris of 1950. This very confrontation is rendered in literary form through contradictory pronouncements (*Je ne vous retracerai pas ce que, Je ne vous dirai pas comment*) and comparisons (*n’était déjà plus, ni même celle*

*d'où*), wherein form apparently conflicts with meaning: "I will not speak of that which I speak of"; "Africa is not that which it is." Negation thus ironically arises as a necessary element of Leiris and (his) Africa both, insofar as it is the only means of expressing their commonly inexpressible presence and potentiality. Leiris' endeavor to evoke an alterity unique to Africa cannot be achieved without evoking a similarly dissimilar alterity in his own account. If Africa is other than Other, in other words, so is Leiris in representing it as such.

While reevaluating the phantasmic Africa of the 1930s, Leiris' Africa of the 1940s presents a challenge no less decisive for the representation of identity. Though stereotypical metaphors cede to more scrupulous metadiscourse, Africa represents a plurality of identities that ultimately cannot be represented and thus call Leiris' own authorial representation--if not his self-representation as an author--into radical doubt. And this doubt, like the fantasy that preceded it, is grounded in a form of difference that not only distinguishes Leiris from Africa, but each from itself as a self. Leiris' identity, not unlike Africa, is beholden to an inner-alterity to which it is sacrificed and from which it is estranged. In *L'homme sans honneur*, this inner-alterity, realized through experiences of estrangement, takes on the unknown, nameless name of the sacred:

caractère d'intimité du sacré [est] allié à son caractère d'étrangeté. C'est dans le sacré qu'on est à la fois le plus soi et le plus hors-de-soi. Parce-qu'on se meut, alors, sur le plan de la totalité. Spectacles insolites qui vous émerveille, vous dépaysent, vous transportent et devant lesquels, pourtant, plus que jamais l'on se reconnaît.<sup>81</sup>

The self-estrangement characteristic of Leiris and his representation of Africa, therefore, come to anticipate not only the concept of the sacred, but also the strange

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<sup>81</sup> Leiris and Jamin, *L'homme sans honneur : notes pour le sacré dans la vie quotidienne : transcription et fac-similé*, 30.

characteristics of its representation. Referenced obliquely, negatively, or metonymically, the sacred, allied to its estrangement (*allie à son caractère d'étrangeté*) demands a language that likewise gestures toward the pre-linguistic, non-linguistic, or silent other, and such is, for Leiris, is the language of *myth*.

***Poetry, or the Language of Myth.*** As the accounts above illustrate, the fetishist, autobiographer, ethnographer, and poet in Leiris all commonly experience a sacrificial encounter with a mortal object that repeatedly redefines not only the experience itself, but their very identity. The equivocations of language so prominent in Leiris' representations of identity parallel the equally equivocal means through which identity itself transforms, again and again, in and through sacred confrontations with the limits of subjectivity. To speak, therefore, of a "language of sacrifice" or a "literature of the sacred" would appear equally equivocal, if not impossible, since it must not only identify the fleeting nature of identity but also how language itself, as a means of identification, is *itself* subject to such shifts of identity and difference. Such a language must expose the very activity that gives rise to the sign, not only to account for the sign's ability, or reliability, to signify something, but to capture the dynamic potential of language in its attempt to articulate the inarticulable.

By the late 30s, Leiris will question the possibility and efficacy of such a language. He prefers other, less overtly linguistic methods of representing the sacred, ones that eschew diegesis and instead stress mimesis, action, and performance. As for other members of the College, Dionysus becomes the interest and inspiration for all things sacred in Leiris; dance, sex, theatre (tragedy), music, and bullfighting impact physical life in a manner at once aesthetic, religious, and existential. Like the fight of the matador, such "activité passionnelle" represents

le rythme en matière esthétique, le plaisir pris dans les sports ou les jeux (notamment les jeux de hasard) participent à des degrés et à des titres divers de cette dynamique émouvante, qui veut que tout moment durant lequel nous nous sentons enfin comme comblés et en accord, vis-à-vis aussi bien de nous-mêmes que de la nature ambiante, revête l'aspect d'une sorte de tangence, c'est à dire bref paroxysme...situé au carrefour d'une union et d'une séparation[.]<sup>82</sup>

The matador, with his ceremonial and repeated near-death encounters, not only embodies but *enacts* the intersection (*carrefour*) of life and death, identity (*nous, union*) and alterity (*nature, separation*) found in paroxysm, the state of sacrifice itself: “La corrida, tel un sacrifice,” writes Leiris, “tend vers son paroxysme” (**Figure 4.2**).<sup>83</sup> Analogous to Leiris’ acrobatic uncle, Leiris’ matador becomes heroic for willingness to sacrifice himself repeatedly in the performance of his art, not for his triumphal slaughter of the bull. Indeed, in the moment of paroxysm, the moment of sacrifice, the bull and the bullfighter confront the same mortal threat. “Homme et taureau sont posés l’un devant l’autre,” Leiris explains, “dans un absolu dépouillement...comme s’il importait qu’ils prennent mutuellement leur mesure avant l’épisode finale ou la précipitation des contraires l’un dans l’autre (équilibre de la frénésie, fusion mortelle du matador et du taureau) s’exprime par la palpitation.”<sup>84</sup>

Frenzy, fusion, palpitation, precipitation: the action of the bullfight is well-suited to capture the dynamism of sacrifice, especially in the dramatic form of tragedy (*l’épisode finale, mortelle*). Both aesthetic and religious, the bullfight “se dérouler suivant un schéma analogue à celui de la tragédie antique” because, among other reasons, “toutes les actions accomplies sont des préparatifs techniques ou cérémoniels pour la mort publique du héros, qui n’est autre que ce demi-dieu bestial, le taureau.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Leiris, *Miroir de la tauromachie*, 26.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 60-1.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 31.



**Figure 4.2.** André Masson, *Untitled* (Illustration for *Miroir de la tauromachie*), 1938. Masson's illustrations for Leiris essay obfuscate the different figures and elements of the bullfight in order to highlight the associated "aspect d'une sorte de tangence, c'est à dire bref paroxysme...situé au carrefour d'une union et d'une séparation."



In the mortal conflict of the bullfight, the bull for Leiris is just as likely to become the tragic hero as the matador, insofar as it too, especially in those moments of mortal confrontation, is likewise both the perpetrator and victim of the same dramatic action. Contrasting with and complementing the tragic result of this drama, however, are its more scripted, ritualized (*cérémoniels*) movements, which for Leiris broach a mythic dimension well beyond that of the common sporting event or artform:

Dans la passe tauromachique le *torero*, en somme, avec ses évolutions calculées, sa science, sa technique, représente la beauté géométrique surhumaine, l'archétype, l'idée platonicienne. Cette beauté [est] tout idéale, intemporelle, comparable seulement à l'harmonie des astres.<sup>86</sup>

This more Apollonian dimension of the bullfight, that which passes into a recognizable regimen, form, or structure, transforms the transience of the ceremonial confrontation into a timeless, venerable act, one whose pattern make it subject to infinite repetition like the

tensions suivies de détente, pareilles succession de rapprochements et d'écart, pareilles montagnes russes d'ascension et de descentes [...]  
l'alternance des processus de sacralisation et de désacralisation inhérente à toutes les opérations proprement religieuses.<sup>87</sup>

Retold as a narrative--which itself exhibits structural patterns--the ritual bullfight becomes an analogously structured account of heroic deeds both repeated and repetitive, transforming the rite into a veritable form of mythopoeisis. Indeed, Leiris' matador in *Miroir de la tauromachie* is compared at once to Icarus, Don Juan, and Milton's Satan. If repetition is a constitutive element of religious ritual, so too

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 26. Later, he adds that "la répétition, de même que dans les gestes du coït, multiple à chaque fois l'ivresse" (Ibid., 51).

therefore is *reiteration* an essential component of myth as the regulated expression of such ritual. As such, myth becomes literary complement of ritual, insofar as “le mythe n’a de réalité qu’en raison du rite auquel il est lié.”<sup>88</sup>

I would claim therefore that it is this *performative* quality of myth, its necessity to be retold that, for Leiris, makes it privileged in the literary representation of the sacred. If it faithfully adheres to its origins in ritual and drama, myth--even in the form of art or poetry--can overturn the mediation implied in diegetic representation through a kind of simultaneous active (re)creation. In other words, myth is or should remain as *mimetic* as possible, reiterating the repetitions inherent in ritual such that the reiteration itself becomes ritualized, a form of action, even a *speech-act*. As such, it retains a certain dramatic quality, insofar as it involves an act (Grk. *dromenon*, “to do,” “to accomplish”) of recreation rather than a passive form of representation. In *L’homme sans honneur*, Leiris considers the latter to be the case for the poet and modern poetry, which are “cowardly” (*lache*) insofar as they use the myth-makers rather than become myth-makers themselves. Poetry is no longer properly “dramatic,” because it appropriates the sacrificial risks made by myth-makers:

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<sup>88</sup> Leiris and Jamin, *L’homme sans honneur : notes pour le sacré dans la vie quotidienne : transcription et fac-similé*, 110. This relationship reflects the theories of the Cambridge Ritualists, a group of classicists otherwise known as the “myth and ritual school,” who share much with members of the College of Sociology (especially Roger Caillois). The ritualists held that the storytelling that accompanies ancient rituals is wed to the origin of myth. Though their theoretical kinship with the College remains largely unexamined, they share a common intellectual parentage with figures like Freud, James Frazer, and William Robertson Smith. In her book *Themis* (1912), for example, ritualist Jane Harrison relates ritual to drama, which (she emphasizes) is derived from *drômenon*, meaning “to do or accomplish.” Borrowing from Émile Durkheim’s notion of imitative rites, she describes how primitive people reenact events of affective intensity, including birth, adolescence, marriage, death. When such emotion is made social or collective, it becomes reified and permanent. The motives for imitative rites are either memorial or preemptive, “re-done” or “pre-done,” and in their social representation eventually becomes religious and/or artistic. The connection she argues for between ritual and myth thus becomes apparent. See Robert Alan Segal, *The Myth and Ritual Theory : an Anthology* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1998).

Pourquoi je n'écris pas plus souvent de poèmes? Parce que l'activité poétique suppose un tel mythe héroïque, au moins une conscience tragique des choses qui ne se retourne pas en pur et simple écrasement. Le poète est, essentiellement, quelqu'un qui sent, prend conscience et domine--qui domine, transmue son déchirement.<sup>89</sup>

Poetry reappropriates myth (*prendre conscience, dominer*) in a manner that betrays myth's connection to the myth-maker's self-sacrificial act (*écrasement, déchirement*). This "false" reappropriation takes, for example, the reified form of literary celebrity and belletrism, as well as the use of established myths. "Le poète n'est plus aujourd'hui un créateur de mythes," he writes; "Il prend pour sujet son propre mythe, Il se forge, et forge, un 'mythe de la création.'"<sup>90</sup> In contrast to this inferior form of "poésie fictive," Leiris advances in *L'homme sans honneur* a new approach to poetry that would make it more proximate to creating myth. Echoing the ancient philosophic distinction between *mythos* and *logos*, he writes that myth "peut être regardé comme essentiellement poétique en tant qu'il est situé aux antipodes de la pensée discursive." "Essentially poetic," that is, insofar as myth illustrates and remains faithful to its origin in *poieisis*, i.e., the *creative act* that allows the litterateur to transform him/herself into a myth-maker (*un créateur de mythes*) rather than a mere myth-teller.<sup>91</sup> This "mythic poetry" (*poésie mythique*), written by what he elsewhere calls "the true poet" (*vrai poète*), would be someone who treats "le langage comme une chose

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<sup>89</sup> Leiris and Jamin, *L'homme sans honneur : notes pour le sacré dans la vie quotidienne : transcription et fac-similé*, 62.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 113. Bataille makes the same distinction in *L'impossible*, whose original title was to be *La haine de la poésie*. What he calls "true poetry" (*la poésie véritable*) evokes those experiences associated with the sacred--death, eroticism, violence, etc.--that, in this volume, are given the undefined appellation of "the impossible." *Strictu sensu*, such a poetry is "impossible" both to read and write, since it insists on a form of articulation beyond the limits of subjectivity and language. This stands in contrast to the conventional understanding of poetry, which without "l'éclat d'un échec" or the "non-sens de la poésie" remains "only pretty poetry" (*que la belle poésie*). See Georges Bataille, *L'impossible: Histoire de rats, suivi de Dianus et de L'Orestie*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1962), 10, 183-4. Worthy of mention is Marie-Christine Lala's analysis of Bataille's poetics in "The Hatred of Poetry in Bataille's Writing and Thought," in Carolyn Bailey Gill, *Bataille : Writing the Sacred*, Warwick studies in European philosophy (New York: Routledge, 1995), 105-16.

sacrée” and “celui chez qui l’imagination poétique tend à *se substituer* à toute autre monde de penser, et ce, jusqu’à dans les circonstances les moins favorables, les plus tragiques.”<sup>92</sup>

Written in such a “sacred language,” therefore, mythic poetry implies the transformation of poetry into myth; but myth represents less a different literary genre than a possibility native to poetry itself as something “essentially poetic.” If *poiesis* provides the common link between poetry and myth, “mythic poetry” signifies therefore not a redundant appellation but the self-sacrificial transformation of poetry “into itself.” Mythic poetry, in other words, bears witness to the self-becoming of poetry itself, a becoming that, instead of abandoning poetry for another form of writing, realizes *the act of its creation* through a mythic confrontation--not unlike a bullfight or sacrifice--within the possibilities of poetic language. It describes poetry’s own endless creative becoming, the sacrifice of what it is for what it can be, which might be more simply characterized as the act of *autopoiesis*. Thus Leiris’ valorisation of the playful displacements and substitutions that happen in poetic language and the act of writing it, which, for him, assume a sacrificial meaning and open up a mythic universe. “La substitution en rêve d’une voyelle à une autre, dans le corps d’un mot, ou l’addition d’une consonne,” he writes, “me donne la clef de l’univers.”<sup>93</sup>

Yet a parallel transformation takes place in the poet through writing poetry. Again, the poet must substitute his imagination for an entirely different world of thought (*l’imagination poétique tend à se substituer à toute autre monde de penser*). “Si j’écris un poème,” writes Leiris, “j’ai--au moins momentanément--l’illusion de la

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<sup>92</sup> Leiris and Jamin, *L’homme sans honneur : notes pour le sacré dans la vie quotidienne : transcription et fac-similé*, 62-65. Emphasis mine.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 50. In *L’homme sans honneur*, Leiris offers a classification of numbers and letters, grouping different symbols according to shape, sound, and other quasi-mystical, esoteric associations (minerals, vegetables, etc.) presumably to highlight the “universe” found in the most rudimentary elements of prediscursive language.

‘totalité’,”<sup>94</sup> the very same “totality” broached in all forms of sacred experience, wherein “on se meut, alors, sur le plan de la totalité.” The encounter with this “totality” has a decisive effect on the poet who, confronted or inspired by this “spectacle insolite,” is forced to take a self-alienating voyage paradoxically only to recognize himself anew *through* such an alienation; such a spectacle “vous émerveillent, vous dépaysent, vous transport et devant lesquels, pourtant, *plus que jamais l’on se reconnaît.*”<sup>95</sup> The poet’s realization that, through *poieisis*, the poet’s identity continually recreates itself as someone other does not reassure the poet, however, nor does it reconcile him with this otherness. Rather, it insists upon the infinite potential to be other, to be elsewhere, and thus continually to recognize oneself anew, because “totality” realized through poetry and other forms of sacred experience is not singular, but multiple; it necessitates finding “toujours un nouveau, un hétérogène, un insolite, par rapport au sacré précédent.”<sup>96</sup> The persistence of self-revelation through poetry assures the poet an ever renewed sense of self and self-estrangement, but never contents itself, or is able to content itself, with either, since such would be a *contradictio in ajecto*. It is impossible for him to “jamais signer le pacte,” as Leiris says; From a form of communion with what is “new, heterogeneous,” etc., the poet reemerges with a new identity that, again, will serve as a point of departure for the next voyage, the next communal encounter with this heteronomous totality. The repeated self-sacrificial confrontations with himself, other than himself, and other than this Other, he finds himself estranged, nameless, paradoxically alone *with* this otherness, between a solitary identity and a more communal, unidentified

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 89. Emphasis mine.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 93.

state; he is “à la fois communié, communiant au maximum et se sentir le plus désespérément seul.”<sup>97</sup>

The poet’s realization that his identity always rests upon an arresting alterity coincides with the analogous self-realization of poetic language, since both are reached in and through the self-creative act of poetry, of autopoiesis. That both stem from the same repeated, self-creative act, testifies to the generative quality of poetry’s presumed mythic action and the ritualization of poetry. As such, poetry therefore implies an action that itself is never-ending or incomplete and consequently defies total articulation. Mythic poetry, as a kind of *speech-act*, must be necessarily always somehow *infelicitous* if it is to remain truly mythic; for if the action finishes or fully sublimates into language, the dramatic dimension of poetry, its autopoietic dimension, is lost and thus becomes mere *poésie fictive*.<sup>98</sup> The challenge of mythic poetry is therefore to sustain the ceaselessly creative work of autopoiesis without ceding to the temptation of becoming wholly “identified” as mere representation. This would, in effect, suggest that poetry and the poet are themselves “whole,” thus no longer active or creative. Such is the case for all “sacred art”:

L’artiste n’est fondé à regarder son activité comme sacrée que si, d’une part, l’exerçant il a le sentiment d’obéir à une nécessité urgente faisant figure de *sommation* et si, d’autre part, l’oeuvre produite est susceptible de jouer un pareil rôle de *sommation* vis-a-vis du spectateur, auditeur ou lecteur.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 45. The meaning of “communion” and “community” here are equivalent to their analogous use in Georges Bataille and Collette Peignot, elaborated in earlier chapters.

<sup>98</sup> In his theory of speech-acts, J.L. Austin distinguishes between felicitous and infelicitous speech acts, what he otherwise calls performative utterances. A performative utterance, such as the nuptial “I do,” is felicitous—that is, transform the fiancé into a spouse—as long as it is said at the right time and under the right preconditions of marriage. Should these preconditions not be met, the performance is infelicitous, and does not achieve its presumed end. See Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2d ed, William James Lectures 1955. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 138.

Myth and mythic poetry like other forms of sacred art defy summary, summation (*sommation, sommaire, somme*) because of their insistence on the autopoeitic action that makes such art always an incomplete process, one lacking a sum--and which yet nevertheless reveals a kind of "totality" (*totalité*). To the degree that poetry is sacred, therefore, it is an artform conditioned on the "work" of the artwork, its *ritual* action, its labor of producing a totality that yet is no-thing in particular. Conceived as such an artform, poetry is written in a language that must transcend *logos* and aspire--through failure and repetition--to the endless end that is infinity.<sup>100</sup> The sacred, like the art, poetry, or myth that exhibit it, is a *whole*, but not a *sum*.

The non-summative quality of the sacred Leiris evokes permits a brief comparison with Kant, whose notion of "absolute magnitude" in his analysis of the mathematical sublime is illustrative. Absolute magnitude describes that which is "absolutely great (*non comparative magnum*)," or "great beyond all comparison"--i.e., infinity.<sup>101</sup> The sublime evokes infinity because it is a quantity is beyond comparison to other quantities, precluding the possibility of addition or subtraction. In this way, despite Kant's own association of religious experience with the dynamical sublime, Kant's aesthetic concept and the religious concept of the sacred (in Leiris) find a common tether, as Rudolf Otto explains in his own quasi-Kantian analysis of religion *Das Heilige*. Like Otto's concept of the "numinous" (derived from Kant's understanding of *noumenon*), the Kantian sublime cannot be explicated, is mysterious, daunting, and intensely attractive. Because of these similarities, the sublime may stimulate the capacity to perceive the numinous, and there is a tendency for the

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<sup>100</sup> Michel Foucault describes a similar paradox in the function of language in the work of D.A.F. de Sade in "Langage à l'infini" found in Michel Foucault et al., *Dits et écrits, 1954-1988*, Bibliothèque des sciences humaines (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 278-89.

<sup>101</sup> German mathematician Georg Cantor, who famously advanced the math of transfinite numbers and set theory in the late 19th century, postulated the idea of the "Absolute Infinite," an idea analogous to absolute magnitude that he equated to God. See David Foster Wallace, *Everything and More : A Compact History of Infinity*, 1st ed., Great discoveries (New York: Atlas Book, 2003).

sublime to pass over into the numinous and for the numinous to pass over into the sublime.<sup>102</sup> Yet it is Durkheim that provides perhaps, at least for Leiris, a more pertinent example of absolute magnitude in *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* wherein he explains the following principle of totemism: “quand un être sacré se subdivise, il reste tout entier égal à lui-même dans chacune de ses parties...un débris de relique a les mêmes vertus que la relique intégrale”; analogously, “la moindre goutte de sang contient *le même principe actif* que le sang tout entier.”<sup>103</sup> Such a *pars pro toto* logic enables the individual to bond with the tribe or gods through common consumption of the sacrificial offering or, contrarily, cause the curses and contagion that spread sickness to the whole tribe. By homogenizing all of that which comes into contact with it, the sacred always creates an *incomplete whole* greater than the sum of its parts, indeed one ultimately *greater beyond all comparison*. The sacred describes an infinite whole, a somehow always “equal” to itself through its fundamentally incomparable (in)equality.

Like Otto or Durkheim, therefore, Leiris’ obscure calculus of the sacred concerns the concept of infinity, which functions mathematically as a singular quantity but represents nevertheless an innumerable multiplicity. In *L’homme sans honneur*, Leiris briefly sketches the idea of “la ‘bonne’ infinité et la ‘mauvaise’ infinité,” which delineate the common oppositions of sacred ambivalence. While infinity characterizes an ecstatic state of community, it is equally descriptive of the alienation and death associated with such a state. Alcohol becomes the privileged example of this double-bind, which “quelquefois...fait sortir de soi” and achieves “la communion réussit,” but

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<sup>102</sup> See Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige; über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (München: C. H. Beck, 1963). Also useful for understanding Otto’s relationship to Kantian thought is Allan Lazaroff’s article “The Kantian Sublime: Aesthetic Judgement and Religious Feeling” in Ruth F. Chadwick, *Immanuel Kant: Critical Assessments*, 4 vols. (London ; New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>103</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse : le système totémique en Australie*, 4th ed. (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1998), 328. Emphasis mine.



“d’autre fois...l’alcool isole” and “tout se perd, s’effiloche.”<sup>104</sup> In essence, alcohol conjures the sense of infinity both through the experience of death and rebirth--not only through the isolated experience of each, but indeed through the alternation of the two that results from repetition (*quelquefois, d’autre fois*).

**Conclusion.** The multiple in the guise of the singular--like Leiris’ Africa, fetishists, poet, or mythology--characterizes both the *quantitative* and *qualitative* nature of the sacred, which seeks to expose ritualistically, again and again through autopoiesis, the infinite multiplicity that underlies all personal identity. As a ritualized form of autopoiesis, the sacred in Leiris essentially refers to the performativity of self-sacrifice. Borrowing Durkheim’s coinage, this might be called the sacred’s “active principle” (*principe actif*); it transforms suicide into self-creation, a creation achieved only through a mythic, ritualized encounter with an inexorable otherness that always precedes and exceeds it in its ongoing, active process of becoming. “Identité a, si l’on y tient, de là forme et du fond,” writes Leiris in *L’Age d’homme*, “mais, plus exactement, *démarche unique* me révélant le fond à mesure que *je lui donnais forme*, forme capable d’être fascinante pour autrui et...de lui faire *découvrir en lui-même* quelque chose d’homophone à ce fond qui m’était découvert.”<sup>105</sup> In his sublime search for self, Leiris’ discoveries thus take the form of literary autopsies, autobiographical reports of a personal identity always kept alive through paradoxically passing on.

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<sup>104</sup> Leiris and Jamin, *L’homme sans honneur : notes pour le sacré dans la vie quotidienne : transcription et fac-similé*, 82.

<sup>105</sup> Leiris, *L’Age d’homme*, 21. Emphasis mine.

## CONCLUSION

*Your sacred space is where you can find  
yourself again and again.*

-Joseph Campbell

For Georges Bataille, Collette Peignot, and Michel Leiris, the experience of death is inherently self-sacrificial. As the compound word suggests, “self-sacrifice” describes a liminal state of being between suicide and survival that reveals the “sovereign” power of existence itself. This power is the *sacred*--an aporetic notion particular to interwar Europe that traces the inner- and outer-limits of subjectivity respectively in life and death. Paradoxically sustaining and striving against each other, sustaining each other through such striving, life and death trace the same limit of subjectivity. Self-sacrifice describes the subject’s traversal between living identity and mortal alterity. “Le sens du sacrifice,” writes Bataille in *L'expérience intérieure*, “est de maintenir tolérable--vivante--une vie que l’avarice nécessaire sans cesse ramène à la mort.”<sup>1</sup> At the limit of life and death, self-sacrifice realizes not only the limits of selfhood, but also that of the immanent otherness that such identity hides. As such, self-sacrifice, which bridges life to death and thereby identity to alterity, reveals the common intersubjective origin of the subject, ethics, and politics. Inversely, such otherness exposes the inherent difference from oneself that lies at the basis of all personal identity, which is realized in self-sacrificial acts of love, revolution, and literature. Once realized, however, once such inner-difference itself becomes identified through such acts, such identification *itself* retraces the limits--whether literary, gendered, sexed, or raced--that provisionally divide identity from alterity, limits to be again transgressed in self-sacrifice. As such, self-sacrifice describes the

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<sup>1</sup> Georges Bataille, *L'expérience intérieure*, 156.

endless rediscovery of others and the otherness *within* oneself, a performative process I call the “divination of identity.”

In essence, the divination of identity concerns the violent dialectic of subjection and transgression. This dialectic is “negative,” remaining forever unresolved in and for subjects. Self-sacrifice, upon which such subjectivity depends and yet cannot fully endure, itself represents the unresolved dialectical outcome of divination. Split between, if not among, life and death, alterity and personal identity, the “self-sacrificial subject” describes at once one, none, and many. For Bataille, this subject comes to queer sexed and gendered identity, though it is provisionally ordered according to heteronormative degrees of subjectivity and self-sacrifice. For Laure, such subjectivity describes a “movement” that ties together nature, a communitarian ethics, and a revolutionary politics. In Leiris, self-sacrifice structures personal experience and its representation in autobiography; however fetishized or fantastic are his women or Africa, for example, such exoticism cannot be had without a commensurate transformation of the distinct poet, autobiographer, or ethnographer experiencing them. As these results suggest, the consequences of this “divination” are sordid indeed. However, to conclude, I will briefly assess these consequences along ethical, political, and aesthetic lines, giving specific attention to the implications of self-sacrificial violence. The following points do not intend to be exhaustive, but rather balanced, summative conclusions and potential avenues for the further study.

Within the history of 20th century French thought, the “ethics of the sacred” has been positively received, describing a form of ontological communion or communication that precedes and exceeds subjectivity, law, and life. As explained in the previous chapters, Maurice Blanchot and Jean-Luc Nancy (drawing upon Bataille and, to a lesser degree, Hegel) elaborate a theory of community predicated upon non-identity in death. Such a “communauté inavouable” or “communauté désœuvrée”

precludes the shared interests or attributes that normally delimit communities--and thereby exclude others. As the "groundless ground" of community, death forms an incommensurate, asymmetrical, and non-reciprocal relationship among mortal men that brings them together paradoxically through their inherent self-difference in death. Such is a community with "nothing-in-common," a community based on a common, undefined alterity that precedes identity itself. The upshot of this theory is elimination of social exclusion and the "collective hypostasis" as Jean-Luc Nancy calls it, which might take the form of a commune, race, or nation based on well-defined possessions or attributes. Due to Nancy, Blanchot, and others, this mode of communitarianism has been fruitfully exposed in the work of Laure and Bataille, highlighting the ethical import of their work.<sup>2</sup> This more favorable estimation of these authors, however, potentially valorizes death in a manner that potentially occludes the different *means* and *forms* of death. Conceived simply as a *sine qua non* existential "human" condition, death as a sacred *end* gets divorced from potentially violent, if not unethical *means*. As a result, all death becomes self-sacrificial, effacing the differences among killing, murder, self-sacrifice, suicide, and simply passing away. Such is the problematic consequence of a generalized conception of death as self-sacrifice, if not the aporetic double-bind of life and death in the sacred. Effacement of these ethico-juridical classifications of death (as explained in the first chapter) is *itself* a partial consequence of transgression. In part, this result makes credible Agamben's critique of

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Nadia M. Sahely, "The Laure-Georges Bataille Exchange: Celebrating the Dissymmetry of the Couple in Interwar French Thought," *Cincinnati Romance Review* 15(1996); Sheri Hoem, "Community and the Absolutely Feminine," *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism* 26, no. 2 (1996); and most recently Milo Sweedler, *The Dismembered Community: Bataille, Blanchot, Leiris, and the Remains of Laure* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009).

Bataille and the College, as well as his claim that *homo sacer*, being “beyond the law,” can be killed, but not murdered or sacrificed.<sup>3</sup>

Within this context, the political implications of the sacred are equally mixed. As a performative model of personal identity, the sacred subverts the essentialism often implied in “being oneself.” As seen in the authors here considered, this is especially the case for gendered, raced, and sexed identities. In turn, as the case for “community” suggests, such performativity implies a critique of the liberal subject and promotes the infinite value of mortal existence beyond its political, ideological, or economic use. In essence, it advances a non-essentialist form of humanism that critiques the liberal politics of individualism, identity, and personal interest. As such, the value of humanity remains “absolute,” as the first and final chapters explain, and thus irreducible to the political, economic, and discursive forces that would limit or demean its value. This is a factor that strongly weds these authors in diverse and complex ways to Marxism and poststructuralism. Indeed, the incomplete reappropriation of negativity in self-sacrifice is a direct critique Marx’s dialectical materialism and, ultimately, the “ultimate” end of the proletarian general strike. Also, by giving a “religious” critique of subject formation, the sacred likewise exposes the shortcomings of secularism and representational politics.

The consequence of such a “sacred life,” however, is that it must lived in violent resistance against any orthodoxy that would potentially profane such a life, and the precise limits of this violence--as the previous paragraph suggests--remain unclear. This is perhaps the lesson Laure’s literature illustrates; despite her self-proclaimed Marxism, the revolution she sought seemed ultimately beyond any political praxis. The same claim can be made persuasively for Bataille who, though retaining his

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<sup>3</sup> As explained in Chapter One, worthy critiques in this vein include Paul Hegarty, “Bataille, Agamben, and the Holocaust,” *Other Voices: A Journal of Critical Thought* 2, no. 2 (2002); Jean-Luc Nancy, “L’Insacriable,” in *Une pensée finie* (Paris: Galilée, 1990); and Dominick LaCapra, *History and its Limits : Human, Animal, Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

Marxist allegiances, becomes likewise disenchanted by the late 1930s with *Le parti communiste français* and *Le cercle communiste démocratique* and begins to theorize an “acephalic” society that rejects at once democracy, monarchy, fascism, communism, and republicanism. To be sure, the ostensible target of this radical politics in *Contre-attaque*, *Acephale*, and the College of Sociology was fascism, which he held to be the final outcome of capitalism and communism alike. Yet these radical Left politics he and Laure shared refused, almost by definition, systematic resistance, organization, and commitment, which would “profane” the sacred dimension of human existence they sought to expose. Hence their shared radical emphasis on sacrificial violence, transgression, and *anomie*, which they held to be the necessary consequences of a life in pursuit of the sacred. While the sheer dynamism of this “politics of the sacred” refuses adherence to any orthodox political program, it likewise does not, cannot ultimately *oppose* any such program systematically without risking some form of orthodoxy, some form of “profane” political limitation that cannot be transgressed. Ultimately, despite the proclamations of its adherents, the politics of the sacred is beyond both Right and Left, and thus remains ultimately neither entirely for nor against either. Leiris says as much when he writes “c’est la présence de cet élément gauche dont la jonction avec le droit fait éclater--brulure de l’ultime transe--le sentiment du sacré.”<sup>4</sup> At the risk of oversimplification, it is likely for this reason that the College and *Acephale*’s “politics of the sacred” did not have the impact on the French Left that its members had envisioned. At best, it offers an intransigent radicalism; at worst, an ineffectual mysticism or aestheticism. These mixed results have caused some to (erroneously) describe it as a “Left fascism” or even fascism itself, insofar as it attempts to reconcile the Left politics of equity with a

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<sup>4</sup> Leiris, *Miroir de la tauromachie*, 55.

Right politics of unity.<sup>5</sup> As I hope the previous study proves, such characterizations are reductive, and undermine the performative dimension of these authors and the elusive nature of their work.

As literature, such problematic conflicts among the aesthetic, the useful, and the radical are far less apparent, however. While the chimerical combinations of poetry, essay, fiction, non-fiction, philosophy, and aphorism manifest in their writings are hardly unique among the avant-garde, Bataille, Laure, and Leiris seem singular in representing the limits of language and literature--and their transgression--as religious performances, forms of ritual sacrifice. Combining a “violent silence” with a profusion of voices and literary forms, these authors represent the two sides of the sacred *vis à vis* authorial identity, which itself lies between writing and the unwritten, writer and reader. Between these lies the life and death of the author, making literature as such a form of sacrifice. “Le sacrifice est un roman, c'est un conte, illustre de manière sanglante”; poetry is “le sacrifice où les mots sont victimes.”<sup>6</sup> By sacrificing itself, this literature promotes an analogous sacrificial experience for reader and writer, and thus a *religious* bond between them fostered through an “ambivalent” experience of ecstasy and apprehension: the *sublime*. Indeed, the sublime might be understood as the common denominator for all the experiences these authors tether to self-sacrifice, including eroticism, revolution, and literature; Rudolf Otto has already suggested (at least for Kant) that the sublime *is* the sacred. If there is any religious significance to be attributed to the literature of these authors, it likely lies in the performative representation of sublime experience. It would seem that such experience, at least for them, remains the only possibility for religious experience after ontotheology and the

<sup>5</sup> As mentioned in the preceding chapters, this include: Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason : The Intellectual Romance with Fascism : from Nietzsche to Postmodernism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004); Daniel Lindenberg and Véronique Julia, *Les années souterraines : 1937-1947* (Paris: La Découverte, 1990); and Giorgio Agamben, “Bataille e il paradosso della sovranità,” in *Georges Bataille: il politico e il sacro*, ed. Jacqueline Risset (Napoli: Liguori, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 5, 156

death of God. The sublime, in short, is the only remaining “absolute.” Yet such a proposition gives pause: what are the implications of retaining only radical aesthetic experience as the ground for renewed religiosity and communal life? Cannot the valorization of sublime experience culminate in an ethically impoverished narcissism or, worse yet, the legitimation of a “religiously sanctioned” violence against others? Question like these, however, remain beyond the purview of the argument here.

To conclude, I return to the four propositions advanced in the Introduction. As Chapter One illustrates, the sacred in the 20th century history of French thought transforms from an ambiguity of taboo and religious experience to an aporetic theory of personal identity, due specifically to those figures in and around the College of Sociology. Distinct from the radical excess and self-expropriation Bataille, Laure, and Leiris envisioned in the sacred, their writings show that such self-expropriation is provisionally reappropriated in the guide of a (new) personal identity. “Self-sacrifice” in this context describes the provisional, albeit incomplete, reappropriation of self-expropriated identity in acts of religion and eroticism. The result of self-sacrifice is the repeated recreation of personal identity or simulations of selfhood. In consequence, the literary representation of self-sacrifice in the literature of these authors destroys--and through such destruction, recreates--an array of different sexed, gendered, and raced identities in turn. Insofar as these identities are neither completely lost in sacrificial death, nor fully recaptured in dialectical “resurrection,” they represent instead a provisional residue resulting from the dialectics of sacrifice. In this way, self-sacrifice in the work of these authors anticipates contemporary performative modes of identity critique, highlighting not only the enduring relevance of the sacred for such critique, but also urging the reevaluation of the meaning and significance of the sacred in French literature and theory.



## APPENDIX

Giorgio Agamben, "Bataille and the Paradox of Sovereignty"  
Translated from the Italian by Sean P. Connolly and Andrea Righi

Source: Agamben, Giorgio. "Bataille e il paradosso della sovranità," in Jacqueline Risset, *Georges Bataille: il politico et il sacro*. Napoli: Liguori, 1987.

1. The following reflections originate from an anecdote Pierre Klossowski told me a few years ago. I met him in his small studio on rue Vergniot so he could tell me about his encounters with Walter Benjamin. Even after forty years, he remembered the man perfectly: "a babyface with a mustache that seemed to have been glued on." Among the most vivid memories he had was one of a Benjamin with his hands raised in admonition (Klossowski at that moment stood up to imitate him) who, regarding the activities of Acephale and more particularly the ideas advanced by Bataille in his essay "Notion de dépense" (which was published three years earlier in the journal *La Critique sociale*), repeated: "You are working for fascism!"

2. I have often asked myself what Benjamin could have meant by this statement. He was not an orthodox Marxist nor a rationalist afflicted by *coniunctivis professoria* who might have been scandalized by the themes of Bataille's thought (as was the case years later in post-war Italian culture). "Anthropological materialism," which he had already sought to profile in the 1929 essay on surrealism, does not seem very far—at least, not at first sight—from the Bataillan project to broaden the theoretico-practical horizon of Marxism. (One has only to think of the theme of intoxication [It. *ebrezza*] which is of central importance in this text). Moreover, Benjamin was well aware of Bataille's unremitting aversion to fascism, which at the time was precisely expressed in a series of extremely acute articles and analyses. If it certainly wasn't about the general themes or the content of Bataille's thought, what could Benjamin have meant by his obscure reproach?

3. I do not think I can offer an immediate response to this question. Since I believe, however, that the problems preoccupying the minds of the period are extremely relevant today, I would like to try to broaden the historical scope of Benjamin's admonition and ask the following: In what way could one affirm today that we too, without knowing it, work for fascism? Or better still, reversing the question, in what way can we claim with certainty that we are not currently working for that which Benjamin could have meant by the term?

4. In order to ask this question, I would like above all to place it in relation to what is for me one of the most rigorous attempts to assess the theoretical heritage of Bataille's thought and to develop it in view of a theory of community. Here I'm referring to Jean Luc Nancy's important essay *La communauté désœuvrée* and to Blanchot's text *La communauté inavouable*, which somehow represent both a resumption and a prolongation of this theory of community.

5. Nancy as well as Blanchot begin by acknowledging the radical crisis and dissolution of community in our time, and they attempt to question precisely the possibility—or the impossibility—of communitarian thought and experience. It is from this perspective that they both turn to Bataille. They commonly recognize in Bataille's work the refusal of any positive community based on the realization of or participation in a common assumption (It. *presupposto comune*).

6. For Bataille, communal experience more precisely implies the impossibility of communism as absolute immanence from man to man and the unachievable quality of any communal fusion into a collective hypostasis. Bataille opposes this conception of community to a negative community, which would be made possible through the experience of death. The community revealed by death does not establish any positive link between subjects; rather, it renders their disappearance or death into that which can never in any case be transformed into a kind of communal substance or work.

7. The kind of community in question here therefore possesses an absolutely singular structure; it assumes the impossibility of its own immanence, the very impossibility, that is, of a communal being as the subject of community. Community is based in some way on the impossibility of community that is, and it is the experience of this impossibility that permits the establishment of the only community possible. From this point of view, it becomes evident that community can only be the “community of those who have no community.” Such would effectively be the model of Bataillian community, be it the community of lovers that he often evoked, the community of artists or, more precisely, the community of friends that he sought to realize in the Acéphale group, for which the *Collège de Sociologie* was the exoteric manifestation; in each case, this negative structure comes to be inscribed at the very center of community.

8. But how can such a community come together (It. *attestarsi*)? In what kind of experience could it be manifest? The privation of the head, the “acephaly” that sanctions participation in the Bataillian group, provides a first possible answer: the removal of the head not only signifies the elision of rationality and the exclusion of a leader but also above all the auto-exclusion of the very members of the community, those who will be present only through their own decapitation and “passion” in the strict sense of the term.

9. This is the experience Bataille defines with the help of the word “*ecstase*” or ecstasy. As Blanchot saw it, and as was already implicit in the mystical tradition from which Bataille borrowed the term even despite the distance he took from it, the important paradox of *ekstasis*, the absolute being-outside-itself of the subject, is that it is no longer there at the very moment of the experience. He must lose himself (It. *manicare a sé*) at the very moment when he should be present to experience it.

10. The paradox of Bataillian ecstasy is therefore that the subject must be there where it cannot be, or, vice versa, that it must be missing there where it must be present. Such is the antinomic structure of this inner-experience that Bataille sought to capture all throughout his life; the accomplishment of it constituted what he called “l’opération souveraine” or “la souveraineté de l’être,” the sovereignty of being.

11. It certainly was not by chance that Bataille came to prefer this expression more than any other definition. With his acute sense of philosophical meaning concerning terminological questions, Kojève, in a letter to Bataille held at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, explicitly emphasizes that the most appropriate term for his friend’s concern could only be “sovereignty.” And Bataille, at the end of *L’expérience intérieure*, in a chapter entitled “position décisive,” defines “l’opération souveraine” in the following way: “l’opération souveraine, qui ne tient que d’elle-même son autorité, expie en même temps cette autorité.”<sup>1</sup>

12. What is, in fact, the paradox of sovereignty? If, according to Carl Schmitt’s definition, the sovereign is he who possesses the legitimate power to proclaim a state of exception and, in doing so, suspends the validity of the juridical order, the paradox of the sovereign can be stated thus: the sovereign is inside and outside the system at the same time. The specific expression “at the same time” is not superfluous: “having in effect the legitimate power to suspend the validity of the law, the sovereign legitimately places himself outside the law.” For this reason, the paradox of sovereignty can also be formulated thus: “the law is outside itself; it is itself outside the law,” or “I myself, the sovereign, being outside the law, declare that there is nothing outside the law.”

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<sup>1</sup> In English: “The sovereign operation, which preserves its authority by itself also expiates (*expier*) this authority at the same time.”

13. This paradox is very ancient and, if one observes closely, it is implicit in the oxymoron that expresses it: the sovereign subject. The subject (that is to say etymologically “he who is below”) is sovereign (i.e., “he who is above”). It is also possible that the term “subject,” in conformity with its ambiguous Indo-European root from which derives the two contrary Latin prepositions *super* et *sub*, has no other meaning than this very paradox, this very residing there-where-it-is-not.

14. If indeed the paradox of sovereignty is such, could we say then that Bataille, in his passionate attempt to think about community, successfully broke its circularity? By seeking to think beyond the subject, by seeking to think about the ecstasy of the subject, in reality he only thought of its internal limit, its constitutive antinomy: the sovereignty of the subject, the being above of that which is below. It is certain that Bataille himself realized this difficulty. One can even say that *L'expérience intérieure*, which may be his most ambitious book, is the attempt to think through this difficulty, which he describes at a certain moment as an attempt to stand “sur la pointe d’une épingle.”<sup>2</sup> He was not able to carry it through however, and the impossibility of successfully conducting the work he undertook on sovereignty is proof of this. It is through being conscious of this essential limit that we can hope to recognize the full import of his thought (It. *raccogliere l’esigenza più propria del suo pensiero*).

15. A similar kind of difficulty struck another thinker of ecstasy many years earlier—the Schelling of *Philosophy of Revelation*—who had entrusted to ecstasy and the stupor of reason the task of thinking of the Immemorable, that which always already anticipates the thought that posits it. The problem posed here is actually still much older than the formulation of the paradox of sovereignty. It pertains to a duality implicit in the very way Western philosophy has tried to think of being (in this sense, Bataille was perfectly right to speak of the “sovereignty of being”): being as subject,

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<sup>2</sup> In English: “on the point of a needle.”

*hypokeimenon*, “matter,” and being as form, *eidos*, or, in other words, being that is always already pre-supposed and being that wholly resides in presence. Aristotle understands this antinomy as a duality of potential (It. *potenza*), *dynamis*, and *energeia*, act. We customarily think of potential in terms of force and power (It. *potere*), but potential is above all *potentia passiva*, “passion” in the sense of pathos, suffering (It. *patimento*), or passivity; it is only secondarily *potentia activa*, or force.

16. Given these two poles through which Western philosophy has thought being, modern thought, from Nietzsche onward, has constantly privileged potential. This is the reason why for Bataille—and those thinkers closest to him, like Blanchot—the experience of this passion, this *déchaînement des passions* is decisive and considered to be the ultimate meaning of the sacred. Kojève emphasized that this passion was to be understood as *potentia passiva*, indicating that the key passage of *L'expérience intérieure* is the one where he states “l'expérience intérieure est le contraire de l'action.”<sup>3</sup>

17. However, since thought about sovereignty cannot escape the limits and antinomies of subjectivity, thought about passion still remains thought about being. In its attempt to surpass being and the subject, contemporary thought has abandoned experience of the act, which for centuries has constituted the highest point of metaphysics, only in order to push and exasperate the opposing pole of potential to the extreme. In this way, however, modern thought does not go beyond the subject but rather thinks of it in the most extreme and exhausted way: that of pure being-below, pathos (L. *patire*), *potentia passiva* without ever breaking the tie that binds it to its opposing pole.

18. That which ties the potential and actual together is in fact not something simple; it's a Gordian knot found in the “gift from itself to itself” (Gk. *epidosis eis auto*) that an enigmatic passage from Aristotle (*De anima*, 417.b) presents in the following

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<sup>3</sup> In English: “inner experience is the opposite of action.”

terms: “To suffer (*paskein*) is not something simple; on the one hand, it is a sort of destruction (*fqora*) of one thing by the opposite, on the other hand, it conserves (*soteria*) what is potential through the agency of action... and such is not a becoming other than itself; it is a becoming of nothing other than itself, something is given both to itself and to action.”<sup>4</sup>

19. If we return to the Benjaminian anecdote that served as our starting point, could we say, to the extent that we are still there where we still think in terms of passion and potential, that we work outside fascism, or, if not fascism, certainly outside the totalitarian destiny of the West that Benjamin could have had in mind with his admonition? Can we say that we have solved the paradox of sovereignty? To what degree can the thought of passion go beyond act and potential? Is passion without a subject truly found beyond pure subjectivity as self-potential? What kind of community lets itself be thought of as its own starting point, such that it is not simply a negative community?

20. Until we can answer these questions—and we are still quite far from doing so—it seems that the problem of a human community freed from presupposition (*presupposto*) and without sovereign subjects cannot even be postulated.

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<sup>4</sup> The authoritative J.A. Smith translation of *De Anima* translates the Greek in the following way : “Also the expression 'to be acted upon' has more than one meaning; it may mean either (a) the extinction of one of two contraries by the other, or (b) the maintenance of what is potential by the agency of what is actual and already like what is acted upon, with such likeness as is compatible with one's being actual and the other potential.” Aristotle, *De Anima*, translated by J.A. Smith, edited by W.D. Ross, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952). The Latin alphabet has been substituted for the Greek.

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